an island in your arms

by wildcard_47

Summary

Tried to run, tried to hide - break on through to the other side.

New York, 1967. Two friends fall out, fall to pieces, and somewhere in between, they fall in love. A Mad Men season 5 AU.

Notes

Title is a lyric from the Doors’ "Break On Through (To the Other Side.)"

Eternal thanks to valadilenne for the beta, and for letting me bother her with a barrage of tiny story details and plot angst for the past few months. Your patience is saintly. You deserve a medal. <3
Sitting in her office with her feet kicked up onto the desk, Peggy's deep into her second cup of coffee and scribbling down potential tags for a new Alfa Romeo campaign when Kenny bursts into the room, a folded newspaper in one hand and his coat in the other.

“You've gotta see this!”

She sits up with an exaggerated grumble, bright morning light from the window behind her making her squint to see him better. “Don't you knock?”

“Guess who's getting hitched.” Ken's smiling so widely Peggy wants to smack him. Judging from his gleeful tone, it's someone at the old place.

“Not Roger, I hope.” She folds her arms across her chest. “Stan still owes me money.”

“Nope,” he replies, his smug grin refusing to budge as he waves the paper in front of her face. “Take a look.”

Peggy snatches the paper from him with a huff, opening it over her desk and fluffing the pages to see the type clearly. She scans the vows section and lands on a picture with two familiar faces whose caption reads HARRIS/PRYCE.

Her eyes nearly bug out of her head.

“Oh, my god!” she shrieks, looking up from the paper and back to her friend, open mouthed.

“Told you it wasn't Roger,” he says, starting to laugh.

“Bullshit!” She lunges towards him in an attempt to smack his arm. He dodges around the desk, just out of reach. “Did you know about this?”

Ken shakes his head, still grinning as he runs a hand through his hair. “Cynthia kept asking all these questions. How long they'd been an item – if I'd noticed anything before I left. I think I told her no a hundred times before she believed me.”

“Jesus,” Peggy breathes, her mind still reeling. “I can't even believe it.”

She stares at the blurb for so long the words seem to run together:

Mrs. Joan Harris and Mr. Lane Pryce, both of Manhattan, announce their engagement to be married. Both the bride- and groom-to-be are senior partners at advertising agency Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce. The wedding will take place in October.

Peggy casts her mind back, trying to recall some possible hint of romance between them. They'd
walk to the elevator together on Fridays – like clockwork, at 5:45 on the dot. And there was tea some mornings, too, she thinks – early in the week?

Mostly, she's coming up blank. Lane and Joan, married.

She has to be hallucinating.

“I really should call her,” Peggy says, looking back to the picture. It's a candid shot of the two of them in Lane's office. Lane's sitting at his desk, glasses on, holding one side of an open Wall Street Journal. Joan's leaning over the back of his chair, right arm resting on Lane's shoulder, left hand curling around her half of the newspaper page. Lane's glancing up and over at her out of the corner of his eye, mouth open as if in mid-sentence. Joan's attention seems to be on the paper but she's smiling from ear to ear, teeth and everything, like he's just said something hilarious.

Peggy stares at the image. She can't imagine what must have changed for them to start seeing each other, let alone get married. And they look so happy. A strange wistfulness curls in her chest.

“It's been too long,” she says, clearing her throat.

Ken tosses his coat in the chair opposite Peggy's desk.

“I'll be right back,” he says, with a glance at the doorway behind him. “Don't move!”

He darts outside. The sound of his running footsteps echoes down the hall and eventually fades. After several minutes, he re-appears, a little breathless, carrying a small Rolodex in hand.

“Give me your phone,” he says, setting the box on a corner of her desk and flipping through the cards.

Peggy gapes at him. “What are you doing?”

He pulls a single card from the rotary. “Calling Lane. What's it look like?”

“You have his phone number?” Like that's the strangest part of all this. Lane and Joan are getting married, but that's nothing. Kenny has Lane's phone number.

Ken gives her a pointed look. “Who'd you think recommended me for this place? Pete?”

Fair enough.

“It's been what, two years since you left?” Peggy argues, while Ken's on hold with Lane's secretary. “You can't just call him up and invite them to dinner. They'll never say yes.”

“Don't be dumb,” Ken says. “I'll lead with lunch.”

He casts her a questioning look. “You free Wednesday?”

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In the cab, Peggy smooths down a wrinkle in her skirt, suddenly nervous.

“How do I look?”

Ken glances over as they come to a stop. “Relax. You look fine.”

Peggy wrinkles her nose. The purple suit with the gold embroidery looked good in the mirror this
morning, but she wishes she'd worn something different. Something a little more fresh.

“I can't help it,” she says by way of explanation, as they step outside into the sunshine, and Kenny pays the driver. She still feels a twinge of that Bay Ridge nervousness creeping into her stomach. “You know Joan doesn't miss a thing.”

She's not mousy little Peggy anymore. She hasn't been mousy little Peggy since Don sat by her hospital bed and told her to get up and move forward, but Joan is probably still....Joan. Powerful and striking. She's going to notice Peggy's clothes.

The DON'T WALK sign flickers to life a few feet before they hit the last crosswalk, forcing them to linger on the curb. As they wait, Peggy watches the traffic pass, cars zooming by in endless but forgettable patterns of black and yellow and grey.

If they're doing TV, she thinks idly, the Alfa needs to be red.

When she looks back at Kenny, he's gauging her expression. “Peg, it's just lunch.”

“I know,” she repeats, matter of fact. She tries to put nervousness out of her mind as they cross 51st.

“There they are,” Ken says, pointing to a couple standing near the corner of the Time Life building. “Lane said the restaurant was a couple blocks over, maybe less.”

From a distance, absorbed in conversation, the two of them look unchanged. Joan – in a black belted trenchcoat and a crimson-colored dress – holds a cigarette between two fingers, a smirk playing at her lips. Lane's in a tweed three-piece. They're talking with a relaxed air, standing about a foot apart.

Honestly, Peggy thinks, they look like two coworkers on a smoke break, not an engaged couple. It takes a few minutes for her to notice any differences.

Lane's hair is graying at the temples. Joan's developed a few more crow's feet around her eyes – not that Peggy will say that aloud. Lane doesn't take Joan's hand as they all walk down 6th. Joan doesn't pat Lane's arm when he opens the restaurant door for them with a jaunty gesture: ladies first. But when the redhead steps into the doorway, Lane's hand moves to the small of her back – so quickly that it's barely noticeable.

Peggy, walking just behind Joan, has to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from visibly reacting. She's so gonna tell Kenny after they leave.

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“How's things at the 4As?” Ken asks Lane, after they get their drinks.

“Oh,” Lane says modestly, stirring sugar into his tea. “Bit dull, really. We're working through the fiscal-year budget, so I'm swimming in paperwork.”

“You're through quarter three now, aren't you?” Joan asks him, and Lane makes a noise of assent, putting down his spoon.

“Yes, finally. Though I had to have a word with Mark Grissom. Never gets things in on time.”

Joan gives Ken and Peggy a pointed look. “He's with Y&R.”

“What about your work?” Lane asks. “Things holding up all right?”
“As well as they can be,” Peggy replies with a shrug, looking over at Ken, who seems to agree. “Accounts is doing well, and the writers are on a roll. Plus, Ted's stopped prank calling half of McCann. I consider that a victory unto itself.”

Confusion etches itself into Lane's face at that last part. Joan's raising an imperious eyebrow.

Peggy's not sure if they think she's joking or serious (and she is serious – Ted blows off steam by pranking people on a regular basis) but either way, the moment's falling flat.

“He ever call Harry back?” Ken asks, after a moment, and Peggy grins.

“Please hold for Mr. Roddenberry,” she says in her best secretarial voice, and Kenny starts to snicker.

“That one was inspired,” he says, turning back to Lane and Joan. “Okay. You guys remember Paul Kinsey?”

Joan gives him a look that plainly says don't remind me, while Lane's frown deepens.

“Copywriter from the old Sterling Cooper?” Peggy prompts. “Had a beard? And a pipe?”

“Was ridiculously pretentious?”

Lane's shaking his head, and glances over at Joan, who mouths something at him. Peggy can't tell what it is, but the words seem to jolt Lane into recognition.

“Ah. All right.”

“Anyway,” Peggy continues with a wave of her hand, “he used to write a little on the side, and he'd come up with these screenplays. Last I heard, he wrote a spec for Star Trek, and gave it to Harry.”

“Really?” Lane asks – with what, Peggy is surprised to note, is genuine interest.

“Don't get your hopes up,” Ken warns the other man. “Apparently it was awful.”

Peggy makes a face at her friend. “Of course it was. It was called The Negron Complex.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she notices Joan's placid expression falter for a brief moment. One side of her mouth curves up in a smirk.

“So,” Peggy continues, gesturing to Ken. “Kenny, Ted and I were all in the office one afternoon – this was the year he started. We'd taken Alfa out to lunch and were...a little relaxed.”

“Sauced,” Ken supplies with a chuckle. “Those Italians put us through our paces.”

“We're talking about old coworkers, the script comes up, and suddenly Ted's on the phone as Gene Roddenberry.”

“He starts out by saying how much he loved Kinsey's ideas, but that the script would need heavy editing to make it to TV, and he needed Harry's help. Starting with the title.”

“What was the one he gave us? Before he figured it out?” Peggy asks her friend, trying not to laugh.

“Ivory Tears,” Ken says with a snicker, and they dissolve into laughter.

When Peggy finally gets hold of herself, she looks across the table to see that Joan's watching them...
with detached amusement, calmly smoking a cigarette, while Lane just seems befuddled.

“Why would he want to call someone as Mr. Roddenberry?”

Peggy exchanges a bemused look with Ken. She's never thought about Ted's pranks much, just learned not to take them personally. “I don't know. It was just funny.”

There's a small silence. Kenny clears his throat. Peggy tries not to fidget. Maybe you had to be there to appreciate it.

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The young waitress sets plates in front of them with a little flourish and a smile, and refills Peggy's coffee before walking quickly back to the counter. Ken digs into his food with gusto, but Lane's peering at his sandwich with a hesitant expression.

Joan looks over at him, briefly. “I thought you were hungry?”

“Oh,” Lane waves a dismissive hand, his voice quiet. “It's got mayonnaise. I didn’t realize.”

But Lane makes no move to signal their waitress, staring at his plate with a hesitant expression, as if he’s not sure whether to scrape off the bread and eat the sandwich as is or send it back. It’s like he’s deciding whether to start nuclear war.

Peggy looks at Joan, waiting for the redhead to make some pointed comment.

Instead, Joan holds out her hand to the Englishman, brisk. “Switch with me,” she says, motioning to Lane's plate. “You like chicken.”

Within a minute, she's cutting into his roast beef sandwich with her knife and fork. Lane's looking down at his new plate and shaking his head like he doesn't understand how this could have happened.

Peggy watches, still stunned, as Joan sets the vinegar bottle by his knife and spoon. Lane takes it with a mumbled thanks, dashing a little of the contents onto his french fries. He's pretending to be absorbed in the process, but a tiny smile blooms at the corners of his mouth. Joan, in turn, pretends not to notice, but she's carefully not looking at him, taking a dainty sip of her tea.

Jesus. If it were anyone else, Peggy would roll her eyes and make some stupid joke: get a room, you're weirding us out. But they're not even doing anything, just eating, and all she can do is gawk like an idiot.

Peggy feels Ken nudge her foot with the toe of his shoe, and she looks over at him, questioning.

He leans over to mutter something in her ear.

“Hands off my sandwich.” And he pops a potato chip into his mouth as he draws back.

She has to turn a laugh into a terrible cough.

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They get to talking about SCDP. Caroline's retiring. Scarlett's getting married.

“Trudy's expecting again,” Joan confides, and Peggy is thankful this isn't new information.
I heard,” she says, in an attempt to be breezy.

“You serious?” Ken asks. “When?”

Peggy shrugs. “Last week. I...ran into Tom.”

A lie. But Tom's always been a little loose-lipped, so it could be true.

Kenny's frowning, studying her intently. “He never told me. I saw him Thursday.”

“That's weird,” Peggy says, fighting for a neutral expression. Really should have kept it vague. She's ready to at least attempt a story, when Joan clears her throat, quietly.

“Gentlemen, if you'll excuse me.”

The two men stand – Lane moves to let Joan exit the booth – and Joan eyes flick to Peggy as she passes, in a silent Well, are you coming?

“Be right back,” Peggy murmurs to the men, sliding out of her seat as quickly as she can.

In the ladies' room, Joan takes the opportunity to powder her nose, sweeping makeup under her left eye in an easy, practiced motion. Peggy stands by the second sink, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, eyes fixed on the faucet. The other woman's not going to pry, but Peggy feels like she should tell Joan something.

“My boyfriend told me,” she begins awkwardly, meeting Joan's eyes in the mirror. “About Trudy, I mean.”

Even if Don wasn't twice-divorced, he's too old to be called a boyfriend. But Peggy doesn't have a better word to describe him. They've been seeing each other. It's not just sexual (anymore), but it's something. So.

Joan casts a sideways glance at Peggy, replacing her compact in her purse. “I see.”

Peggy doesn't know if Joan has figured out who she means, or if she's just letting her get the words out of her system before they go back to the table.

“Thanks for saving me, back there. I haven't told Kenny about him,” Peggy continues in a rush. For some reason, she wants Joan to understand why this is important, why she hasn't said anything to her closest friend. (She tries not to dwell on the fact that her closest friend is Kenny. I mean, Jesus.)

“We're keeping it quiet. It's kind of....complicated.”

And still new – less than six months. No one at the old place knows, though Peggy's sure that won't last. Once Roger hears about it, so will the rest of the world.

Her mother still hates Don, so telling her is out of the question. Anita might warm up to him eventually, but Peggy doesn't have high hopes. Plus there's Megan – and even Betty – to worry about. They'll know sooner or later.

“It's beyond complicated,” she says, with a little sigh.

Joan stares at her for a moment, considering.

“I understand,” she says. Her eyes sweep sideways, briefly, as if she's thinking of something else, then snap back to Peggy's. Her mouth quirks in reassurance. “It can be difficult, at first.”
Peggy blinks, surprised. Joan, admitting something was difficult? It dawns on her that for all the time she spent wondering how Joan and Lane began seeing each other, she never really thought about how hard it must have been to be together at all. They were both married before, and with kids. Trying to work together and figure out how to be a couple at the same time.

She reaches out, puts a tentative hand on Joan's arm.

"I'm really happy for you," she says. As weird as this scenario is, she wants Joan to know that, at least.

Joan smiles at her, and Peggy smiles back, feeling a sudden rush of nostalgia. She's not friendly with many women at CGC. If she's being honest, she has missed Joan. Six years at the same agency – they went through so much together.

"Have a drink with me," she continues, impulsive.

Joan raises an eyebrow, and Peggy pulls back, fumbles for the right turn of phrase.

"I don't mean now, just...soon. This has been nice."

Peggy's almost afraid the older woman's going to say no, make some comment about how earnest little Peggy Olson still is, after all this time.

"Lane's taking the boys to the movies on Friday," Joan says instead. Her tone is casual, as if she's just making an offhand comment about weekend plans, but Peggy knows Joan well enough to understand this is the invitation.

She could do Friday. Don's got to go to Rye anyway. It's Bobby's birthday.

"We could stop by PJ Clarke's." Peggy says dryly. She hasn't been there since at least '63. Probably some kind of awful punk bar by now, packed by kids with eyeliner and weird piercings, dancing wildly to David Bowie instead of doing the Twist.

Joan actually laughs. "Yes, I'm sure we'd blend in very well."

It's pure Lane, right down to the inflection. Peggy can't help but laugh.

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They end up in midtown, at the Pierre. Joan suggested it more for old times' sake than anything else, but Peggy didn't argue. She was curious to see how the hotel had changed, now that she's not working out of a cramped two-room suite.

Her first impression is that it isn't as nice as it used to be.

Sure, it's still reputable, and the bar's elegant, but it has a distinctly old-fashioned look. It looks like something Cooper's sister would have dreamed up. Heavy brocade curtains, pale blue, frame the high windows on one end of the room. A cream-colored wallpaper with an intricate pattern dominates the walls, and even in the low light Peggy can tell it's peeling at the corners, in small yellowing pieces.

Thank god some things never change. The drinks are as good as Peggy remembers.

She takes another sip of her whiskey, casting a sideways look at Joan.
“So the boys are at the movies?”

“Yes. And it was Kevin’s turn to choose,” Joan says with a nod. “God only knows what they’ll see.”

“Is Lane’s son with you, too?” Peggy asks, a little surprised. She can’t imagine Lane’s ex-wife letting their son live in America. Didn’t she always hate New York?

“For the summer. School starts back on September first.”

Peggy assumes he must go to school in England.

“How old is he now?” She has a vague impression of meeting a little red-haired boy on the day they moved into the Time Life building. He kept dropping his glasses.

Joan's mouth is wry. “Fifteen.”

“Jesus,” Peggy says, horrified. She tries to imagine that red-haired boy as a teenager. In her mind, he’s a gawkier version of Lane, all knees and elbows. “Really?”

“We're not as young as we used to be,” Joan says, arch.

“Speak for yourself,” Peggy grumbles, taking another drink.

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They've started making fun of their fellow bar patrons when Joan checks her watch, eyebrows lifting in surprise at the time.

“I should go,” she says. “I told Lane I'd be home before ten.”

Peggy makes a frustrated face. So soon? “One more drink. You can call him when you leave.”

Joan responds with one of her patented glances: eyes flicking up to Peggy's with cool condescension. “Sorry. We've got plans.”

A little jolt of embarrassment courses through Peggy's chest, but she decides to tease her friend instead of apologizing for the faux pas, doing a sort of saucy wiggle in her seat.

“Romantic plans?”

Joan rolls her eyes, but she's smiling, so Peggy's not worried.

“Peggy, are you asking if I sleep with my fiancé?”

The redhead puts a cigarette to her lips, lighting it in an elegant motion, while Peggy presses a hand to her mouth and tries not to giggle. So she's acting like a teenager. It's still Joan and Lane and sex. Lane's a nice man, but he looks like he couldn't turn on a stove.

She tries for the millionth time to imagine the two of them living together, being married, but the picture of family life she conjures up looks like something out of a wackier Father Knows Best. Lane and Joan sitting side by side at the kitchen table, dressed to the nines and working through a stack of budget reports. Sleeping in twin beds, wearing his and hers pajamas. Lane in a stupid little nightcap.

She really shouldn't press the subject. It'd be rude.

“Is it the tweed?” she asks, dry. Her mouth twitches as she tries and fails not to grin, and her voice
turns low, an exaggerated purr. “Does it drive you wild?”

Joan takes a long drag from her cigarette, voice airy when she speaks. “You'd be surprised.”

Peggy dissolves into laughter again, her cheeks growing warm. God, it's too weird. She's definitely shutting up now.

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She goes over to Don's on Sunday morning. Mostly for the sex – it's been two weeks, which is a long time for them – but she can't help fussing at him, afterward. She's sprawled on the left side of the bed, sheets tangled around her feet.

“Why didn't you tell me Lane and Joan were dating?”

He actually starts laughing. Bastard.

“Come on,” he says, tone innocent, turning his head to look at her. “I thought you knew.”

They've made it a point not to talk about work, but in the handful of times he's mentioned either Lane or Joan in the past few months, it's always in the context of the agency. Lane thinks the overhead is good, but won't increase our budget. Joan keeps denying Stan's expense reports. Lane and Joan were out on Monday, and Roger bitched all morning.

(Okay, that one makes more sense, now that she thinks about it.)

Peggy props a pillow behind her neck as she sits up, shooting Don the side-eye. “They've always worked as a team. How was I supposed to know they were doing more than...budgeting?” She flaps a hand at the bedsheets between them as she says the last word.

Don's still lying on his back, staring up at her with a raised eyebrow. “Budgeting? Really?”

Ugh, he's so smug. She's scatterbrained right now. He knows what she means.

“You know they've been together four years?” she continues, undeterred.

“I didn't,” he says, quietly.

Peggy reaches to her left, fumbling around in the nightstand drawer for the pack of Luckys she knows is in here somewhere. “I asked Joan how it all started. She said it was hard to pinpoint.”

She's curious. It's not a crime.

“Come on,” Don says again. She can feel the bed springs shift as he rolls toward her. “Things happen. People don't always know why.”

His way of changing the subject. Peggy rolls her eyes. She can take a hint. Somewhere between a pair of nail clippers, a few hastily-folded pages of Ad Age and an airplane-sized whiskey bottle, her fingertips nudge the pack of cigarettes, and she pulls it from the drawer with a victorious air. Putting one to her lips, she tosses the pack onto Don's chest, casual. His hands move to pick it up, pluck a cigarette for himself before grabbing the lighter from his side of the bed.

“Hand it over, slowpoke,” she says with a grin, holding out a hand, palm up.

Don places the lighter in her hand, his voice low. “You are very bossy today.”
Two clicks, and Peggy exhales in a jet of smoke.

“You love it.”

Chapter End Notes

"But wildcard, you might say to your computer screen, it's been ten months since the end of season five! Aren't you over what happened in The Other Woman or Commissions and Fees? Did you really have to spend the hiatus writing a behemoth Joan and Lane romance AU just to satisfy your personal head canon?"

"Yes, Reader," I will say back to you, trying to look stern. "I did. I married them."

(Yeah. So this happened. I'm going to guess we'll have about 20-25 chapters total, based on the amount of story I've plotted out. Chapter 2 will go up in the next day or so. Hope you guys enjoy!)
December 1966

“Lane? Did you hear me?”

Joan glances up from her notepad, writing a small question mark next to *Mohawk* with the comment *ads suspended, pending strike resolution.*

Though he has the provisional budget gripped in one hand, it's clear Lane's attention is far from work. They've been sitting in his office for a little over an hour, and it's not even noon, too early to be distracted. Lane's sitting to her left on the sofa, staring out the window with an expression of deep longing etched into his face.

Joan puts her work aside, gauging his troubled expression.

“Lane,” she says again.

He blinks, and seems to come back to himself. She takes the opportunity to continue, gently:

“Talk to me. You've been quiet today.”

To be honest, he's been quiet all week. If Joan asks him *what's wrong*, he'll probably downplay the problem, make it sound like nothing, but if she phrases her concern as a statement, he'll honor the inherent request, and eventually circle to the problem at hand.

Lane's very still. He doesn't even look at her.

“I think I might have to leave New York.”

The words *leave of absence* flit through her mind, unbidden.

“For how long?” she asks. She tries not to dwell on a reason.

Lane glances over at her now, as if he's surprised to have spoken aloud, and she sees an answer in his ashen face.

“What?” she breathes. A sharp feeling settles in her chest. “Lane, *why*?”

They've worked as a team for so long it's difficult to think of doing this job alone. She could take over the finances with little issue, but he excels at reining in the partners when her opinion might be ignored. Having Lane here allows her to focus on day-to-day operations. He can't leave. He's needed.

A muscle in Lane's jaw twitches. He gets up, walks over to the bar and pours three fingers of scotch into a tumbler, draining the liquor from the glass in one long gulp.

She watches with mounting anxiety as he fixes a second drink. Instead of downing the contents, however, he returns to the sofa and offers it to her without a word, sliding back into his seat.

“You recall Lucky Strike, of course,” he says after a moment, and Joan can't help it – she has to bite
back inappropriate laughter. Twelve and thirteen-hour days spent in full-blown panic, and Lane in London for the first week of crisis, leaving her and the then-head of accounting to work through billings on their own. As if she could forget.

He must see the tension in her face, because he tries to smile, but it's more of a grimace.

“Yes. Well.” He removes his glasses, rubbing a hand over his eyes.

“At the time,” he continues, “considering the...significance of that account to this company, the bank required...capital in order to extend our credit line. As a form of collateral.”

Joan casts her mind back. There was a significant amount of money given to the bank. She remembers that much, but the exact number eludes her. She hadn't seen the canceled check, and at the time, Lane had dealt with the bank almost exclusively.

“This contribution was...divided among the partners, I imagine,” she says, careful to phrase it as a statement instead of a question.

He gives a jerky sort of nod. “Yes.”

She exhales, trying to shed her anxiety. The overall problem is becoming obvious.

“What was required—” Joan has to amend her question “—from the senior partners?”

If she has an idea of what Bert, Roger, and Don paid, it'll be a window into Lane's particular situation. It'll spare him the embarrassment of naming a figure.

Lane's voice is so quiet, she has to strain to hear him. “One hundred thousand dollars.”

Her mouth drops open, and he glances over, noting her shock. “Each.”

“Good god.” Joan reaches for the glass in front of her, and takes a long gulp. It sounds like a joke. Eight times what she makes in a year, and they wrote a check without even blinking.

If the senior partners gave a hundred grand each, what the hell was asked of Lane and Pete?

The question must show plainly on her face, because Lane continues, slowly:

“Junior partners...put in half that.”

Fifty thousand dollars. God, no wonder he wouldn't talk about it.

“Pete doesn't have that kind of money,” she blurts first. It was a hardship for Lane, obviously, but Pete's still young, early thirties, with a new mortgage and a baby. And Joan's aware his family was once well-off, but he's no Roger. He would have struggled to put up that kind of cash.

That muscle in Lane's jaw works again, taut. “Don paid his share.”

The bitterness in his voice – the way his lips press together in the silence, and how his hands clench and unclench into fists – betrays the anger underneath that simple statement. Don paid an extra fifty thousand on Pete's behalf. But he didn't even think to do that for Lane.

(And Lane would never ask, even if he was desperate.)

Joan suppresses a sympathetic noise. Even after three years at this agency, Lane's still an outsider, excluded from the rest of the group. He had to write that number in a ledger, like it was just another
billing: Pete Campbell, fifty thousand, paid. It must have been painful.

She takes a breath, forces herself to push frustration aside. Get to the root of the problem.

“How does that affect your being here?” she asks, trying to word this question as delicately as possible. “You’re...very responsible.”

He's not like the others. Lane would have budgeted for the loss. There wouldn't be gambling, or women, or needless extravagance. He'd need money for his family, of course, but there's still something she's missing.

“British...expatriates...are taxed at a considerable rate,” Lane begins, as if this explains everything. He's staring at her glass, and she slides it towards him in silent permission. He takes a long drink, then sets the tumbler aside.

She's quiet, waiting for him to continue.

“My contribution was seen as an investment, rather than a personal expense.” He laughs without humor, the expression on his face bordering on despair. “And Inland Revenue takes issue with overseas investments. To put it lightly.”

Inland Revenue...a British IRS, she supposes.

“They want their share,” she guesses, and he nods, once.

Joan watches him silently. Depending on the interest – and, she thinks suddenly, the exchange rate – he could owe them quite a bit of money. He might not have been able to budget for that.

After a moment, he takes a pen from his suit pocket and tears a corner from a page of her steno pad. He scratches something on the scrap paper – a number. Carefully avoiding her eyes, he pushes it into her hand. His calloused fingers are rough as they brush hers.

She unfolds the paper:

$8,000. By Thursday.

Her heart pounds in her throat. Three days, counting today. Oh, my god.

“What are you going to do?”

“I—” he begins, but his voice hitches, and he presses a fist to his mouth, overcome.

She puts a hand on his shoulder. “Lane...”

His face crumples at the contact, a harsh cry escaping him, and tears prick her eyes. She rubs his shoulder for a moment with a little shushing noise. It's all right. You're not alone.

“I can't go back to England,” he sobs.

The word surprises her. Can't? He feels that strongly about it?

“What would I tell my wife? My son?”

Lane pulls out his handkerchief, covering his eyes.

Joan stares at him, aghast. If this began with Lucky, it's weighed on him for a year, and he hasn't
even told his wife? Why on god's green earth wouldn't he say anything? She feels a stab of pity. Pride comes before a fall, her mother used to tell her.

“Listen to me,” she says, her grip on his shoulder tightening. “You need to talk to the other partners. They—”

“No,” he choke out. She's taken aback at the vehemence of it. “Out of the question.”

“Excuse me?” she interrupts. “Lane, it's a business expense. If you'd just—”

“I said no!” he retorts harshly, one fist clenched around his handkerchief. “I cannot!”

She lets out a huff of surprise, retracting her hand from his arm. If this is how he's dealing with the problem, it's no wonder Mrs. Pryce has been left in the dark.

“I'm sorry,” Lane says after a moment, his voice a raspy plea. “It's—you cannot ask that of me, Joan. I can't do it.”

His face is flushed with shame. Joan presses her lips together, willing herself to stay composed.

Lane wipes his eyes, stuffing his handkerchief in a pocket. “I couldn't bear it if they all knew.”

She understands his reluctance, to a degree. It's difficult to ask for a favor, particularly one involving money. And it can be even more difficult to watch others spend without a thought, while you're struggling to make ends meet. But this favor – this money – is the difference between being happy in New York and being unhappy in England. He has to speak up for himself.

“Talk to one partner, in confidence,” she suggests. “Don, or Mr. Cooper.”

“Cooper?” he echoes, recoiling a little. “You must be joking.”

No reaction to Don's name. Joan wonders if he could be trusted to help.

Lane turns his attention back to the spreadsheets on the table in front of them – a signal that the subject is now closed.

“I'm taking care of it,” he says, after a long silence. “I don't want you to worry.”

He sounds embarrassed, like he regrets confiding in her.

Joan watches him carefully. Ordinarily, she would pretend to know nothing and they'd carry on with work as before. But this is a serious problem. There are only a limited number of actions he can take at this point, and he's refusing the most straightforward solution. She can't help worrying.

“What will you do?”

He waves one hand in a dismissive motion.

“I'm expecting a call from my solicitor.”

Which means he hasn't decided. She sighs, putting a hand on his arm.

“Take an early lunch. I'll say you have something at the 4As.”

She wants him to smile, but his anxious look won't budge. “I couldn't eat.”
“No arguments,” she says, fixing him with a mock-stern expression. “You should try.”

It takes her several minutes, but she finally talks him into going. He'll feel better if he has something besides scotch, she says. If he gets away from the office for an hour or two.

Her motives aren't completely pure. Once she's seen him disappear into reception, Joan begins to take inventory of the situation. There is a problem, and it has to be solved. She feels a tingle of exhilaration at the back of her neck. It energizes her to be in the midst of a particularly difficult task. Makes her focused.

She needs to speak with Don. It may take time to convince him to help.

(But she has a feeling that he would be willing to help, if he were aware of the situation. He paid fifty thousand out of his own pocket to keep Pete out of debt, and they're not close. Why wouldn't he do the same for Lane, when it's so much less?)

Joan gathers the company checkbook and ledger from the file cabinet, her heart pounding. *Something’s been brought to my attention,* she recites to herself, attempting to suss out the perfect turn of phrase. *A business expense.*

***

“Jesus,” Don says, after she finishes her explanation. “Why didn't he say anything?

What he means is, why did Lane say something to you, but there's an insinuation there she doesn't like, and so she shakes her head. “You know Lane.”

The sharp feeling in her chest has returned, indicating her nervousness. She isn't sure Don does know Lane, not very well, at least. They seem friendly enough, but Joan thinks that any genuine friendship between the two men, if it exists, has happened by accident, rather than design. She hopes he'll realize what she means. Lane's too proud to ask for something this significant. He might even be afraid the debt reflects badly on him, professionally.

After what seems like a year, Don nods his head, as if her words have finally clicked in his mind.

“Cut him a check. I'll cover the difference.”

She feels dizzy with relief. Thank god. “It should be routed to London immediately. We can't make it out to Lane. He'll never take it.”

Don raises his eyebrows, plainly stunned. “So who the hell do we send it to?”

“I have his lawyer's information,” she says primly.

In point of fact, she has the name and number of someone who is *likely* Lane's lawyer. Anthony Marsh, Esq. called from London at eleven-twenty-five – while she and Lane were talking in his office – and left a message marked 'urgent – please call.' Lane didn't check his messages before going to lunch, and Scarlett was too busy gossiping with Clara to notice Joan lifting the slip from her desk.

If Joan's instincts are right, Mr. Marsh will try to call again before the hour is out. Scarlett's lunch
break will run through until one fifteen, and Joan needs to be available to intercept this call.

If. If. There's so much that could go wrong. What if he doesn't call?

(But this is the person to speak with. Joan can't explain how she knows; she has a gut feeling.)

It will be easy to pretend to be Lane's secretary. Mr. Pryce has given me strict instructions. All she needs is the routing number. She can pretend to have misplaced it, get him to repeat it over the phone, then go to the bank and have the money wired to England this afternoon.

Of course, they'll call Lane tomorrow morning – or very late tonight – to speak with him personally. She can't keep him in the dark forever.

Don lights another cigarette straight off the last. He's staring at her, intent, like he's trying to wrap his mind around something baffling.

“Why does this matter to you?”

Joan keeps her expression carefully neutral. “He's a founding partner.”

“So's Pete,” Don counters, exhaling smoke. “You wouldn't do this for him.”

She gives a little shrug, choosing her next words carefully.

“Lane’s work is essential. We need him here.”

Don still has a calculating look in his eye. Joan's not one for unnecessary sentiment, but she knows she owes him something more than shop talk. This is a very generous gesture. The fact that he's willing to do this for another person – on behalf of someone who isn't even here to represent himself – is important.

She clears her throat, trying to distill her thoughts into the simplest words.

“He's my friend,” she says eventually.

It’s a little odd, saying the word aloud, but it is true. Lane is probably the closest friend she has in this office. They see each other every day. They work together well. Occasionally, they’ll discuss personal subjects, things that are bothering them.

Friends. If you’d asked her three years ago, she wouldn’t have believed it.

Don stubs out his cigarette, and motions for her to hand him the checkbook. She watches closely as he fills in the blanks with a careful hand.


He looks up from his work, sliding the book back across the desk in a silent *your turn*.

Joan's hand shakes slightly as she signs her name above Don's, turning the H in Harris wobbly. She's been authorized to sign company checks for months – *in case of emergencies*, Lane insisted when she returned from having Kevin, *in case I'm not here to do so* – but she has never put her name to an amount this large. Most of the checks she signs are ones Lane can't be bothered with: petty cash, secretaries' payroll, etc.

Lane will be furious, but she couldn't watch his growing desperation and do nothing. She couldn't allow him to be spun out of control by a problem that was fixable. Period.
She takes the book from Don, grateful.

“Thank you,” she says, her words clipped. He gives her a short nod, and she collects her things, exiting his office without another word.

**

The next morning, Joan sits in her office, observing Lane's closed door. He didn't come back to work yesterday.

She's aware that sending him into the world after two gulped-down drinks wasn't her best idea. He looked exhausted and hungover when he arrived this morning.

Her stomach churns with anxiety each time Scarlett picks up the phone. Ten o'clock: they should have called by now. Eleven o'clock: they will call soon. Mr. Marsh assured her he would phone by close of business. She doesn't want Lane to be ambushed by the news, but she hasn't been able to articulate the best explanation for her actions. It's important that she find the right words before she speaks to him.

Eleven-forty: Lane's private line rings. At eleven forty-six, an almighty crash echoes from inside his office, as if he's shoved the contents of his desk onto the floor. Scarlett is already rising from her chair – and Joan has a sudden vision of the girl fleeing Lane’s office in tears; he won’t react well to an interruption – but before the secretary can get around the desk to investigate further, the door flies open, and Lane storms into the hallway, his expression livid. Ignoring Scarlett completely, he enters Joan's office, slamming the door behind him. The pictures on the walls tremble a little, but Joan remains seated, her expression steely.

"You had no right!" he shouts, pointing an accusing finger.

Joan raises an eyebrow, trying to keep a lid on her temper. She needs to show him his financial security matters to her more than his outrage. “What did he say?”

“What did—are you out of your mind?!" Lane sputters, face reddening, as if he can't understand her composure. “How dare you go behind my back! I told you what was happening in the strictest confidence!”

Her voice is cold. "You told me you couldn't go back to England. I did what I thought was necessary."

"It was not your decision to make!" Lane shouts back. “It was none of your goddamn business!”

She’s seen Lane angry – flowers come to mind. She’s heard him scream at Pete Campbell and the other partners through a shared wall and an intercom, but he has never allowed himself to break this way in front of her. It certainly isn’t pretty. A purple vein stands out on his forehead.

A headache pounds behind her temples, and she stands slowly. "It became my business the minute you said the words Lucky Strike – for god’s sake, Lane, it was always the company's business!” She folds her arms across her chest, stubborn. “I wasn't going to sit back and let you dangle like a worm on a hook. It's done."

"You should have done nothing!" He slams a fist down onto her desk. A flower-patterned teacup,
empty from this morning, rattles loudly in its saucer. “I was taking care of it!”

“By doing what?” Joan counters loudly. “Pretending everything was fine? You should be thanking me!”

“You deliberately lied to me!”

“It fixed your problem.” She stares him down. “I'm not sorry.”

Lane's face is blotchy with anger, eyes narrowed behind his glasses. He steps closer to her desk, leaning over it slightly – recognizing for the first time that they aren't alone in the building, that there are other people listening. When he speaks, his voice is a harsh hiss: “You realize I haven't even shared this information with my own wife?”

He’s pathetic, Joan thinks suddenly, a knot of contempt forming in the pit of her stomach. What kind of man clings this desperately to his pride, when it's almost ruined him? Critical thoughts tumble into her head, one after the other, as if a dam has broken. He's self-conscious. Awkward. Hungry for the smallest scraps of kindness, like a stray dog. And nearly as handsome as one, to boot.

She fixes her glare on Lane’s plain, pockmarked face, feeling sharp anger spread through her chest as she remembers that kiss. Why did he have to ruin everything with one desperate pass? Joan can still feel the ghost of his hand on her waist. His mouth over hers.

She keeps her voice low. “Well, it isn't my fault you're too afraid to solve your own problems.”

Lane’s mouth drops open, and he recoils.

“You have no idea—” he sputters, voice rising with each word. “—the kind of sacrifices I've made for my family—"

“Excuse me?” Joan snaps back. “I'm supporting my mother and my son!”

He’s shouting again: “And you are so arrogant, you think you can simply—”

“At least I'm not a coward,” Joan snarls.

Lane's so stunned that he chokes on his next words, staring at her with complete incredulity. Color floods his face, and he lets out a shaky breath.

She should probably be more ashamed to throw that word at him, but all Joan can feel is a sick satisfaction, heartbeat thrumming loudly in her ears.

That muscle in Lane's jaw is twitching again. When he speaks, it sounds as if he's forcing out the word: “Don't.”

“It’s true,” Joan says, watching as a ruddy flush spreads to his ears and neck, and she hears herself say something so vehemently it’s almost a relief. “You must need an adult to look out for you if your only solution is to panic and stick your head in the sand. For god's sake, Lane, if you confide in someone, don’t act surprised when they try to do something for you, because you certainly weren't complaining about my help yesterday.”

“Help?” he snarls in a low voice, pointer finger hovering in front of her face. “Considering the pleasure you take in reigning above the rest of us, how satisfied you are to think you’ve got your fingers on the office pulse, a head buzzing with other people’s humiliating secrets, and the correct answer for everything, no matter whose job you’re somehow magically brilliant at doing, I might as
well call it *foreplay*.”

Joan snatches her teacup from the desk and sends it sailing into the file cabinets. It shatters with a satisfying crash, porcelain spraying across the tile.

Lane's half-frozen in shock, eyes wide, and she grabs his wrist, pulling him towards her a little. She can feel his heartbeat thudding under her palm.

“You don't get to talk to me that way,” she snarls.

They stare at each other for a moment. Joan's so furious she's practically baring her teeth. Lane's jaw is clenched tightly.

She wants him to yell, now. She's ready to scream at him for as long as it takes to force an apology. But Lane yanks his arm out of Joan's grasp and turns away from her, flinging open the door. It smashes into the coat rack with a loud clatter.

In the now-open doorway is Meredith, wearing a stunned, embarrassed expression, and surrounded by a gaggle of dumbstruck secretaries.

“Oh, for god's sake! Move aside!” Lane snaps, gesturing wildly, and the girls scatter in ten different directions to let him through. Joan's two steps behind him into the hallway, eavesdroppers fixed in her sights, when out of the corner of her eye she glimpses Pete push his way into Lane's path.

“Do you two have any idea—”

The tantrum Pete's prepared is mercifully cut short as Lane plants a hand in the center of the young man's chest and shoves him away, continuing toward reception without pause. Pete stumbles backward into the corner of Scarlett's desk, loses his footing, and falls to the floor in a graceless tumble of arms and legs.

An awed silence settles over the spectators, punctured only by the sound of someone's badly muffled laughter.

Pete picks himself up, adjusts his blazer, and approaches Joan, his voice even haughtier and louder than before. “*What is going on?!*”

Joan's fury rises to new levels.

“I *don't have time for this*,” she snaps, turning away from Pete and rounding on the secretaries who are still gathered near her own door.

“What the hell are you all looking at? Get back to work!”

Heads down and eyes averted, most of the girls snap into action with murmurs of *yes, Joan, sorry, Joan.* The slowest person to retreat is Meredith, sniffling like a little girl who's lost a toy, clutching a pink-pastel handkerchief.

“Why are you *crying?!*” Joan snaps, seeing red. For god's sake.

The blonde girl gives a little squeak of fear and takes off toward the ladies' room.

Joan looks to her left, briefly. Pete's staring at her with a gobsmacked expression, as if he can't *believe* scolding a secretary was more important than his little fit.

She turns to Scarlett, who's half-standing, half-sitting on her desk.
“Have Meredith clean that up,” she orders the brunette, gesturing to the broken china in her office.

“What about—” Scarlett inclines her head toward Lane's office, her expression tense.

Joan stares at the secretary, incredulous. Does she have to do everything around here? “What do you think?”

She turns on her heel with a huff, walking briskly toward the kitchen. Once alone, she yanks a ceramic mug from the cupboard, pouring coffee into it with a shaking hand. She hasn't been able to stand the taste of coffee since she had Kevin, but there's no tea in here, and the water has always been disgusting. She's not going to leave the kitchen empty-handed. It would seem impulsive, as if she needed the time to cool down.

(She does. No one else needs to be aware of it.)

***

It's too quiet. Peggy notices the silence as soon as she and Kenny step out of reception.

The only foot traffic Peggy sees – freelancers and a couple of secretaries – are all taking the long route toward Roger’s office, past the kitchen and cigarette machine, avoiding the creative hallway altogether.

Scarlett's desk is piled high with work, while Clara and Bridget keep shooting each other little nervous glances over their typewriters, like they're waiting for something to happen, or someone to speak.

Pete's door is closed. Lane's door is closed. Joan's door is wide open, but a quick glance through the window reveals she isn't in her office.

Stan, Ginsberg, and Harry are sitting on one of the couches in the lounge, their conversation barely a mutter. Standing close to them are Scarlett and Meredith. The blonde is holding a broom in one hand and a handkerchief in the other. Her eyes are wet with tears. The brunette has her arm around the younger girl, trying to comfort her.

“What's going on?” Peggy directs her question to the boys.

Harry gives her a nod in greeting. “You missed the fight.”

She's gonna kill Kenny. Scheduling a client brunch on a Tuesday. Stupid.

“Are you serious? Who?”

“Mom and Pop,” Stan says, and Harry starts to snicker.

Peggy rolls her eyes. Not this again.

“Don't call them that.”

Ginzo's sketching something in a notebook. “He's been at it for an hour. Not gonna stop.”

“It's the same old story,” Stan says solemnly gesturing expansively toward Joan's office as if he's narrating a movie. “Mom bought something expensive. Dad blew his stack. They screamed so loud they made the baby cry.”
Meredith makes a little noise of frustration. “No one yelled at you!”

Stan raises his hands in a gesture of innocence, not bothering to hide his amusement.

“I wasn’t the moron with my ear at the keyhole.”

Meredith’s eyes well with fresh tears.

Peggy hits Stan’s arm with her purse, while Scarlett shoots him a frustrated glare. “You’re not helping.”

It’s quiet for a moment, and then Harry speaks up. “Plus, Pete got pushed into a desk.”

Ken’s frown of confusion is so deep it's almost cartoonish.

“Who was fighting?”

“Lane and Joan,” Ginzo says in a bored tone, not even looking up from his work.

Ken glances from Ginsberg to the other boys, like he isn’t sure whether to take this answer seriously.

“What?”

“It was brutal,” Harry says, shaking his head like he still can’t believe it happened.

“Your office is over there,” Meredith protests in a wobbly voice, gesturing down the long hallway with the broom handle. “How would you know?”

“Hey, we heard ‘em all the way in creative,” Stan offers with a shrug. He turns to Peggy, his mischievous smile widening. “Lane was actually shouting. And one of them threw something. The way those two were going at it, I’m surprised Don didn’t hear.”

Ken's confused expression is morphing into curiosity.

“What’d they fight about?”

Peggy's curious, too. She can't imagine what would make mild-mannered Lane lose his cool. Joan, sure. Peggy remembers the old Sterling Cooper, how the steno pool lived in fear of her temper. Right day, right time, and Joan could blow up on anyone. But Lane? Who knows what makes him tick?

(Besides Pete, apparently. Peggy still hasn’t gotten over that.)

Harry shrugs. “We missed a couple key parts. She's—” gesturing to Meredith “—the only one who heard the very end, and she won’t fill us in.”

“I'm not a gossip,” Meredith snaps, looking offended.

“You already told Scarlett,” he complains, put out. “What's the difference?”

Meredith pretends not to have heard him, but a flush of embarrassment stains her cheeks. Scarlett gives a little shrug and a tight smile, but says nothing.

The approaching click of Joan's high heels on the tile floor spurs the girls into motion. Meredith drops the broom in a clumsy panic, practically running to get back to her place at reception, while Scarlett – with an exasperated sigh – gathers it up in one quick motion and heads for the storage closet.
Peggy watches them go, sympathetic. The rest of today won’t be easy for them.

Joan rounds the corner with a cup of coffee in one hand, entering her office and briskly closing both doors.

Once she's inside, Harry clears his throat and stands, fidgeting a little and peering into Joan's window with an anxious expression.

“I should probably — CBS is supposed to give me a call, so...”

With that, he leaves, giving them an awkward wave.

(He's always been terrified of Joan. It's pretty funny.)

Ken taps Peggy's elbow with his hat, walking backwards in the direction of his office. “Don't forget, we're meeting Art at 3:00.”

“I'll buzz you when we're done,” she tells him. He nods once, to show he’s heard her.

She motions to the boys on the couch, inclining her head towards their office. “Come on. We've got rewrites.”

As they pick their way across the lounge, Peggy glances into Joan's office through the window. The older woman’s brow is knit in concentration. She’s studying a large spreadsheet that takes up most of her desk, only breaking focus to write notes on a small steno pad by her right arm.

Behind her, Stan gives a low whistle under his breath, sounding impressed. “Like it never even happened.”

Just before they hit the hallway, Peggy sees Joan fumble and drop a cigarette as she takes it from the package. It surprises her. She can count on one hand the number of times she’s seen the other woman fumble anything. Joan is nothing if not steady.

She’s probably reading too much into it, Peggy thinks as she sinks into her chair, eyes flicking over a corrected mock-up for Cool Whip, which tops the pile of work on her desk. Lane and Joan are both reasonable people. Give it a couple of days and it’ll all blow over. Like that thing with the flowers.

She shakes her head in an attempt to clear it. She's got work to do.

Chapter End Notes

In Commissions and Fees, it seems like Don would have been willing to cover the $8K debt out of pocket, had Lane been willing to ask for help from the very beginning. So it seemed natural to me that Joan might come to a similar conclusion if she were aware of the entire situation, which is why I had it play out that way here. I wanted it to feel like the problem of money owed is a relatively easy fix -- and in a way, it is. An incurred debt just needs to be paid. But the issue built up and swelled because Lane's ashamed of his troubles, and couldn't admit his secret to anyone without admitting he'd failed.

Now, the problems that may have sprung up in place of the money troubles won't go away so easily, but que sera sera.
For the rest of the day, Joan's hands shake when she thinks about the argument. She keeps them busy or folded in her lap so other people don't notice, but that night, her mother makes a jab at her about butterfingers when she drops the can of formula twice on her way to the stove.

Joan casts a pointed glance at the drink in the other woman's hand – her third.

“You should talk.”

Even though the baby goes down by eight, and her mother stumbles to bed not long after, Joan doesn't want to sleep. She wraps a floral-patterned robe around her dark leggings and thin sweater, cuts off the television, and sits in the living room with her cigarettes, hoping the nicotine will calm her down.

It doesn't. Just dulls the anger.

**Foreplay.** He's disgusting. A gentleman wouldn't speak to her that way.

Furthermore, she doesn't need the office to satisfy those needs. **Ever.** But she could count on one hand the number of times she's heard Lane mention his wife outside the context of some petty disagreement. He's the one who's obviously frustrated.

She's not going to apologize for taking care of a personal distraction and a company issue. It was the right thing to do. But she can't stop picturing Lane's stunned expression, the moment she called him coward. The way his cheeks flushed red, like an embarrassed child, or how his blue eyes widened in shock behind his glasses. He'd flinched so hard at the word it was as if she'd physically struck him.

When the cigarettes don't soothe her, Joan gives up and goes to bed, but she lies awake for another hour before she's even tired, listening to the baby's soft, even breaths and staring at the odd patterns of light playing on the ceiling. She keeps turning the situation over and over in her mind.

Lane has a family, for god's sake. No matter how much that check hurt his pride, or how angry it made him, he should want to make sure they're provided for. Simple as that.

She closes her eyes, and tries to relax.

**

Over the next week, papers begin appearing on Joan's desk at odd hours. When she arrives for the day, or when she returns from lunch, her inbox spills over with invoices, reimbursement forms, expense reports and other papers that would normally be sorted out with Lane's help, or at least in his company. He's doing his best to avoid her without compromising their work or involving anyone else in their argument, which she's probably supposed to appreciate.

It annoys her, instead. Joan makes a point of delivering each item back in person, as if everything is normal. She raps out a sharp, two-tap knock on his door, folder already in hand, so she doesn't have to waste more time than necessary fumbling with papers. It takes five steps to walk inside until she's
standing in front of his desk.

Lane pretends not to notice her entrance, focusing intently on the paper in front of him. He writes something in the margin, then flips to the next page, studying it with supreme, silent fascination.

It's a travel invoice for Sugarberry, for god's sake. There's nothing fascinating about it.

On a wicked impulse, Joan decides to place the folder straight onto his desk, directly on top of the paper which seems to be so captivating. Her file knocks the invoice from his hands, hitting the surface with a small thump, and there's a pause as Lane stares down at the bundle, clearly debating whether to acknowledge her interruption or keep up the pretense.

He sets his jaw. A little huff of annoyance escapes his lips.

This shouldn't make Joan want to smirk, but one corner of her mouth turns up, pleased. He thinks he can play this game with her, like they're children? No. She will not be ignored.

When he finally reacts – pushing the folder aside with one hand, only to resume his studious air, Joan turns to go. That's more like it.

**

Once the novelty of the silent treatment wears off, Lane transitions from flat-out ignoring her to speaking in curt, clipped sentences and pretending to be very busy whenever she walks into his office. Twice, between the time it takes for Joan to knock on his door and enter the room, she hears the telephone receiver being yanked from its cradle.

Lane holds the phone to one ear, expression intent as he writes something down on a notepad. His eyes flick toward Joan as she crosses the room, but he shakes his head at her, covering the mouthpiece with his writing hand:

“Can't talk – very important call.”

He uncovers the mouthpiece, speaking a little louder.

“Yes, I am still here. We'll have to go over the paperwork. Mm. I'll need your, ah, signature by Thursday at the latest.”

Stopping in front of his desk, Joan crosses her arms across her chest, silently calling his bluff. None of the line extensions are lit, and she raises her eyebrows, indicating this oversight to him with a wordless glance. Lane notices her looking, and his eyes widen with slight panic, but he soldiers on as if determined to sell his performance.

“Yes, well...I'm quite busy, so it's absolutely imperative——”

The buzzer on his intercom sounds. Lane actually startles at the sudden noise, almost dropping the receiver, and Joan has to press her lips together to keep a straight face.

Scarlett's voice fills the room:

“Mr. Pryce, there's a call for you on line one.”

Lane hits the button with a flat-palmed hand. “Yes, all right, Scarlett!” he retorts loudly, unable to suppress his frustration. He shoots an abashed glance in Joan's general direction as if to say fine, you've caught me.
"What's that?" he mumbles, holding out a hand for the folder Joan's carrying.

"Creative," she replies coolly, dropping it onto his desk and pushing it towards him. A few loose papers are buried underneath its path, Joan can hear them rustling as they crinkle with the movement. "From last month."

Lane purses his lips, annoyed either with the mess or her blatant refusal to let him be. He retracts his free hand and reaches for the telephone base, fingers hovering over the blinking extension.

"If you'll excuse me," he says, arch, and she rolls her eyes, exiting the room and pulling the door closed with a little more force than necessary.

**

The next day, Joan attempts to duck inside Lane's office around ten o'clock, and almost crashes into the frame when the knob won't budge.

She turns to Scarlett, stunned and annoyed.

"Is he at home?"

Scarlett shakes her head, slanting a nervous glance toward the door. "No, he's here."

"I need to speak with him," Joan says, curt.

"He doesn't want to be disturbed," Scarlett mumbles.

Is Lane really so childish that he'd lock his door to keep avoiding her?

"This is an office!" she snaps, practically shouting the remark at the closed door to make sure he hears it. What kind of petty, immature coward does this?

Scarlett's head bobs up and down in a nod. Even worse, she's smiling nervously, grasping at basic politeness like an idiot because she clearly has nothing important to add.

"I'm really sorry," she mumbles.

Joan has to walk away to stop herself from doing something truly rash.

**

It's almost two, and his door is still locked. She's forced herself to concentrate and accomplish as much work as she can, though anger constricts in her chest every time she glances across the hall and sees his nameplate gleaming back at her.

Lane can't stay in there forever. He'll have to eat eventually. He'll have to go home. It occurs to Joan that he even knows she has a master key. What the hell does he want? Why is he doing this?

She waits until the girls are on a break. Scarlett and Clara always go together. And Bridget has begun to take twenty extra minutes to join them in a couple of cigarettes. Yes, Joan's noticed, and she's already warned the girl once. It'll start coming out of her paycheck if it keeps up.

Joan opens her bottom desk drawer, shunting aside the box of petty cash for her small brass key ring. She can feel the thin wooden fob buried under a mass of handwritten receipts, and she pulls at it gently until the entire ring emerges from the drawer.
Lane's can't just lock himself in his office like a surly teenager and expect everyone to leave him alone. And she can't put everyone else's schedules on hold out of consideration for his hurt feelings. This is a business, not a high school club.

Keys clenched in her hand, Joan closes the drawer and stands, smoothing out a wrinkle in her purple dress and picking up several folders from her outbox to deliver to Lane. Since she's going.

She moves quickly toward his office. The bundle in her hands is unsteady, so she places the files on the corner of Scarlett's desk for a moment, to make sure they don't topple. After taking another moment to find the correct key, she walks a few steps forward and inserts it into the lock.

"Bad idea," Stan Rizzo drawls as he walks toward the creative lounge, eyes narrowing as his gaze travels from her outstretched arm to the brass ring in her hand.

"I didn't ask for your opinion," Joan retorts, to which he holds up his notepad in surrender, ambling past her and beginning to whistle loudly. She doesn't recognize the tune.

Joan turns the key, hears the bolt click open in response. She feels a rush of satisfaction when the knob turns in her hand and she's able to push open Lane's door in one quick motion, the other keys jingling like a small wind chime as the door swings forward.

Lane's on the phone, gripping the receiver in one hand and the base in the other, pacing behind his desk. His black suit jacket is unbuttoned, and the side panels flap behind him slightly when he turns. Mid-stride, he spots her in the open doorway, and flushes red with anger.

"For god's sake!" he shouts, shoving the telephone base back onto the desk. Judging by the thunderous look on his face, Joan assumes he's just going to scream at her. But he turns toward the window a little, lowering his voice and continuing to speak into the receiver.

"No, I'm sorry, it wasn't — I didn't mean you, sir. I understand that it is difficult. I'm simply asking if there is a way to delay next year's deposit without—"

There's a pause, and Lane makes a frustrated sound.

"I told you I've already spoken with him. And with all due respect, even as recently as last year, the former headmaster and I were able to—yes, I'm aware you cannot afford to indulge the majority of parents in this manner, but I am not asking for an indulgence..."

He exhales, letting the sentence trail off into nothing, and grinds the heel of one hand into his forehead, squeezing his eyes shut as if his head aches.

Joan's become so used to him faking important phone calls it didn't dawn on her that he might actually be in the middle of a serious discussion. Her stomach churns, and embarrassment prickles hot at the back of her neck, but she tries to ignore this, to focus on anything other than his fraught expression. She thought he was stonewalling. That's why she came in.

"No, of course," Lane says finally, clipping his words so forcefully it's a wonder he can grit them out. "We'll speak tomorrow. Good day."

He slams the receiver down. After a moment, he straightens up, and meets Joan's eyes, leveling her with an amount of silent contempt usually reserved for office troublemakers and difficult clients.

"I realize you enjoy involving yourself in other people's private miseries, but this is a new low, even by your standards."
Joan keeps her voice sharp.

“Your door was locked.”

He levels her with a glare and a snide:

“You can't bear to admit when you've done something wrong, can you?”

Joan glares right back, folding her arms across her chest.

“Your personal problems are starting to affect our work.”

If he had just been honest about this situation from the very beginning, she wouldn't have gotten so worked up. Instead, he let her think he was avoiding her. For hours. What the hell was she supposed to do?

Lane clenches his jaw, turning his face away from her.

“Leave me alone,” he growls.

Her mouth drops open slightly, but when she doesn't move, he raises his voice. It's not a shout, but it's forceful enough:

“I said go.”

She does, closing the door hard as she leaves, and yanking her keys from the lock so quickly the ring nearly sails out of her hand and into Bridget's head. Stan and Ginsberg look up from their work with bug eyes and slack mouths as she crosses into her office and shuts the door behind her, zeroing in on the bar to the right of her desk and throwing the keys somewhere onto the floor, near the file cabinets. They land on the tile with a loud metallic thump.

She concentrates on keeping her hands steady as she pours two fingers of gin into a rocks glass. You can't bear to be wrong? What the hell does he know?

**

Monday morning, when Scarlett appears at Joan's door with several folders' worth of financial papers in her arms and a nervous, deer-in-headlights expression, Joan resigns herself to continued awkwardness. She tries to ignore the voice in the back of her head that says it's your own fault. It was...foolish to unlock Lane's office door. She let herself get angry, and she made an impulsive decision, but it does not need to become an issue. She'd apologize if she thought Lane might accept it, but an apology won't do any good when they're not even on speaking terms.

There's a traffic meeting scheduled for one o'clock. So, at twelve fifty-eight, when Scarlett slides into the conference room with her steno pad, mumbling something about Mr. Pryce and urgent business, Joan jots down several swear words in shorthand onto the margins of her notes – a trick she'd used years ago to control her temper – and decides it's for the best.

It's very easy to avoid seeing Lane, as he mostly keeps to his office during the workday. It's made even easier now that people are restless for the upcoming holiday. Creative has started to spend much more time in the common spaces.

The one step Joan refuses to take is to change her routine. If she and Lane encounter each other in the main hallway, early in the morning, or the kitchenette, or – once – in the elevator, it's easy to let her eyes slide silently over his tense expression, then redirect her gaze.
He always looks down, as if he's embarrassed.

**

A delivery comes for her by courier the day before the office Christmas party.

When Joan walks out to reception, she's ready to scold the messenger for a mix-up. Nothing's supposed to be delivered today except dry goods and the extra tables, and neither are due until this afternoon. So, when the young man places a manila envelope in her hands and says you've been served, his words ring in Joan's ears for a full minute before she's able to react. She stands in the middle of reception, stunned into silence, catching a glimpse of Meredith's dopey expression and feeling hatred surge through her body until her hands start to shake. What the hell is wrong with that girl?

The next couple of minutes are a blur, but Joan does remember screaming surprise and throwing the Mohawk model onto the girl's desk before she's suddenly pulled sideways by the upper arm, away from Meredith and toward the glass doors.

“Let go of me,” she growls, struggling to break free, but Ken Cosgrove's grip on her elbow remains steady. His other hand comes around to rest on her upper back as they move into the hallway, shepherding her toward the closest elevator.

“We're taking a walk.”

Ken doesn't look angry, but it's clear from his tone this suggestion isn't optional. Joan grits her teeth and takes a deep breath through her nose, forcing herself to relax. Once she stops resisting, he drops her arm with a mumbled sorry, giving her an awkward pat on the back before pulling his other hand away.

Inside the elevator, she folds her arms across her chest, leaning back against the paneling and staring fixedly at the wall of numbered buttons in front of her. Ken adjusts his tan overcoat, obviously waiting for her to hit one of them, but when she doesn't, he pushes the button for the top floor: the restaurant.

“My purse—” Joan begins, but Ken holds up a hand, cutting her off.

“It's on me.”

She closes her eyes and presses the fingertips of one hand to the bridge of her nose, failing to stop the headache that's building in her sinuses.

**

In the kitchen, Scarlett takes a deep, calming breath as Meredith hiccups out another sob and rips the kleenex she's holding into two large pieces.

“It's not my fault!”

“I'm sure Joan's sorry she lost her temper,” Scarlett says in a soothing voice, attempting to be sisterly although she's sure Joan must have a very good reason for flying off the handle.

“She threw an airplane at me,” Meredith wails.

“Model airplane,” Scarlett corrects quietly. “And you're not hurt.”
A clinking noise to their left makes Scarlett look up. Dawn's picking out a freshly-washed mug from the dish rack. They exchange a brief glance. One corner of Dawn's mouth quirks up in a curious hello as she looks at them. Scarlett refrains from rolling her eyes as she gestures to the blonde. Meredith's crying. It's just another Thursday.

"I don't even know what was in that stupid letter," Meredith says with a sniff, wiping her nose on the sleeve of her gauzy yellow blouse. "She didn't have to call me an idiot!"

"What happened?" Dawn asks, pouring herself some coffee.

Scarlett fills in the details as quickly as possible, but mid-story, a new thought occurs to her, and she turns to Meredith.

"You could have just signed for the delivery, taken it to her privately."

"The man wouldn't let me," Meredith retorts, as if this should be obvious. "He kept saying he had to do it."

Scarlett frowns. She didn't mention that earlier.

"Could have been army business," Dawn says quietly.

"I don't know what it was! When Joan came out, he just gave her the envelope and told her she was served. What does that even mean?"

Scarlett and Dawn exchange a brief, surprised look. Scarlett doesn't know why Joan would be receiving legal papers, but she has one small suspicion. Dawn seems to have come to a similar conclusion, but unfortunately, it doesn't go unnoticed. Meredith stares back and forth between the two of them, letting out a whiny:

"What?"

Scarlett looks to Dawn, who purses her lips and shakes her head, clearly unwilling to voice the theory herself. After a moment, the brunette sighs.

"It might have been papers for...divorce."

Lowering her voice on the last word.

"If Dr. Harris was the one to—file, then they have to serve the other person...you know, formally. It would explain why she got so upset."

Dawn shifts uncomfortably on her feet, eyes darting toward the doorway.

"We don't know if that's the truth. It could be anything."

"What could be worse than a divorce?" Meredith yelps.

There's a sudden noise outside, and both women shush Meredith. Ginsberg's speaking to someone in the hallway, and his voice is loud, like he's directly on the other side of the wall:

"If you're looking for Scarlett, I think she's in here."

He pops his head into the kitchen doorway, lifting his chin to Scarlett in a brief acknowledgment.

"Lane wants you."
Scarlett winces, muttering a quiet:

“Thanks,” before bustling out into the hall.

Mr. Pryce stands awkwardly near the far wall of the creative lounge, a clipboard in hand. His eyes are fixed on a framed painting, though when Scarlett speaks, he glances over at her.

“I'm so sorry. I was helping Meredith.”

He mumbles a reply she doesn't quite catch. She hates when he does that, then she has to spend the next five minutes playing guessing games. Speak up!

“I said I'd like to review traffic figures,” he says, more loudly this time, with obvious impatience in his voice. “You took down notes.”

Scarlett blinks.

“Oh – of course. I'll just...go get them.”

It occurs to her, as she's pulling open her middle drawer, that he should have seen the minutes by now. She left a report of the meeting on his desk two days ago. How did he miss that?

**

Joan stabs out her cigarette. It's practically burned down to the filter.

“He's divorcing me.”

Judging by Ken's open mouth and wide eyes, he's thrown for a loop. Joan goes to take another sip of her brandy alexander, but finds that the glass is empty, so she swirls ice around the bottom, watching the pieces dilute the leftover cream. He'd ordered for them both, otherwise she would have gotten gin.

Joan stares down at her left arm, resting on the surface of the polished wood bar, and remembers Greg's hand wrapped around her wrist on the morning she'd kicked him out, his fingers digging into her skin so hard they'd left bruises. *You're not a good man. You never were.*

“Shit,” Ken finally says, after a long silence. “Joan, I'm sorry.”

Joan lifts one shoulder in a shrug.

“Don't apologize.”

He winces, embarrassed, but after a moment, raises his glass as if for a toast.

“Okay. Well, you've got your family, and plenty of friends. What do you need him for?”

Joan manages a laugh, and clinks her empty glass to his, but underneath the humor is an undercurrent she doesn't like to acknowledge. She'd be lying if she said she hasn't been lonely, though she would never admit this aloud. Not to Ken Cosgrove, anyway.

In the back of her mind, a tiny voice whispers: Lane would understand. She thinks about their argument, about how badly she's behaved, and surprises herself when she comes up melancholy instead of angry. It's probably the brandy.

After another moment, Joan realizes she's tracing the lip of her glass with one fingertip, and stills her
restless hand. She's too unsettled. Clearing her throat, she turns back to Ken.

“Gin fizz this time.”

He signals the bartender.

**

Just before the Christmas party begins, Lane speaks to the group about the company's financial state – intending, Joan believes, to praise everyone's patience with the lack of Christmas bonuses and continuing budget restrictions. Unfortunately, he's not able to capture his audience, and while Joan gives his (rambling, overly formal) words her full attention, appreciating the fact that he is trying, some people have less control over themselves. Lane's barely gotten the last word out of his mouth – to a few confused whispers and weak applause – when Harry Crane loudly calls:

“Don! Speech!”

until it becomes a chant, picked up by the boys in creative. Joan suspects they've all been drinking already, which accounts for some of the rudeness, but she still levels Harry with her nastiest glare. He has no excuse.

Of course Don's speech is a home run. They whistle and cheer and hand out drinks once he's finished. Even Joan has to admit his ad-libbed pitch is impressive. It's short, to the point, and extremely motivating. The world will know we've arrived.

She means to speak to Lane before the party starts in earnest. But he's pulled aside by Cooper for a question about corporate tax codes, and Joan's given a cup of champagne by Caroline, who immediately turns her ear with the best Roger story she's heard in months. Apparently, he bought an easel this week. He had an experience that told him he should try painting.

By the time she realizes Lane's missing from the crowd, it's been an hour, and the party's started to become a little lively. He's not in the main hallway, and she has to pick through most of creative's personnel to get to his office door. Stan's sitting on Bridget's desk, in the middle of a story:

“--so I tell her that if she wants, I'll be glad to bag up her broccoli—”

which earns him several jeers and a couple of empty plastic cups tossed at his head, which he bats away with a laugh.

“Jesus. Tell me she didn't fall for it,” Ginsberg says with a groan.

Joan knocks on Lane's door. No answer.

After a moment, she decides to try the handle. It's unlocked, and she peeks around the frame with judicious caution, expecting to see him inside, drinking whiskey or listening to the radio or something. But his hat and coat aren't on the rack, and his briefcase is gone, too.

She shuts the door quickly, and turns back to the creatives, who are giggling like idiots.

“So we're picking up all this shit from the sidewalk – I mean, this bag has split everywhere – and she finds the package from the pharmacy. I think: fuck, she's gonna see that I bought—”

Joan clears her throat, looking at all of them and snapping out a sharp:

“Did Lane go home?”
They stare at her, still snickering but having the grace to look embarrassed about it. Peggy's the only one able to get herself under control.

“I don't know. We haven't seen him.”

“How helpful,” Joan retorts, and walks off without another word. Behind her, she can hear Stan's raucous laughter get louder, as he picks up the lost thread of his story.

She takes a small cup of champagne into the now-empty conference room, and nurses it for a minute. Lane must have felt embarrassed after his speech went over so badly, or was uncomfortable being near her, given the circumstances, but it's Christmas, for god's sake. It's a party.

For a moment, Joan considers putting a brief note on his desk, or writing some kind of card, but quickly dismisses the idea as puerile, and decides instead to put the ongoing fight out of her mind.

Chapter End Notes

One of my favorite aspects of Joan's character is her confidence. But the flip side of that strength can be arrogance, or (in Joan's particular case) the tendency to make a snap decision or judgment and justify it as the correct one to the end. As my beta put it: "Joan's not a monster, she just always thinks she's right."

So, while she's not the type to gnash her teeth over a decision that's already made, I wanted to show that she does give real consideration to her actions, and is affected by the consequences, even when the justification for those actions starts to get very, very, very thin. Notice, too, that she does not apologize...
January 1967

Friday afternoon, Joan's mother says she's going out to run an errand and disappears for the rest of the night. Joan doesn't discover that ten dollars is missing from her purse until she's standing in the bodega checkout early Saturday morning, a basket of produce in one arm and Kevin in the buggy.

Thank god she's known Castor for years. He lets her charge it to her account.

She balances her book as soon as she gets home. Rent and electric should have gone through yesterday, and if her next paycheck gets deposited by Thursday at noon, she'll have just enough money to get through the week. She'll pay water and gas after that.

Joan's always been careful about her budgeting, but the past few months have been very tight. The oven broke for good in October after months of small repairs, and the new model took Joan's savings along with it. Greg hasn't sent her a dime since she told him to leave, and Kevin's growing so fast she can barely keep him in clothes. Even the Army has stopped sending her money. Joan's yelled at plenty of bureaucrats and secretaries over long-distance, but resolving that problem is proving impossible. Would her benefits stop once he filed for divorce? She doesn't think so. In the meantime, it's cheaper for her mother to watch the baby than to hire a girl, even if the older woman drinks like a fish and doesn't pay rent.

Sunday afternoon, while Joan's giving Kevin a bath in the kitchen sink, the refrigerator sparks near the wall outlet, terrifying her into thinking it'll start a fire or shock them both to death in the process. She yanks the baby out of the water, soap still in his hair, and swaddles him in a towel, placing him in his crib and rushing back to the kitchen, ready to throw a pot of water over the flames.

There's no fire, just a lot of smoke, but Joan unplugs the machine just to be sure it's safe. Something inside it is making a grinding noise, and it begins to smell within ten minutes: a combination of turning food and burnt rubber.

She gets Kevin cleaned up and down for a nap, then spends ten minutes on the phone with the super, who promises to send Apollo. After an hour, Apollo finally arrives, glancing nervously around the apartment as Joan ushers him inside.

"Is it...only you and the baby, signora Joan?"

"My mother's out," Joan says pointedly, and the young man seems to relax. She shows him into the kitchen, explaining the situation, and stands by the counter as he crouches down to inspect the outlet damage. He then fusses behind the refrigerator for a long time, swearing loudly in Greek and making frustrated noises every time he reaches into the box for another tool.

"Not good," he says when he emerges, wiping black grease from his fingers with a faded blue rag. "For right now, it's gonna work a little. Icebox will run today, maybe through tomorrow. But the rest, the electric...."
He waves one hand toward the machine. Joan mutters a curse under her breath.

“I have some time tomorrow, in the day, to fix the rest. If you want, I, ah, wait to charge you,” he says quietly.

“That’s not necessary, thank you,” Joan replies, keeping her voice even and her expression as neutral as possible. She’s not a charity case. “Just write up a receipt.”

She’s signing the check when the front door opens, and her mother bustles into the apartment with a raucous laugh, bidding someone in the hallway goodbye. Joan hears the door slam into the wall – probably denting the paneling – and the sudden noise wakes the baby, who begins to scream. Apollo pales visibly, gathering the check and his toolbox and attempting to slip out as quickly as possible. It still doesn’t stop him from getting cornered in the hallway.

Joan stays in her room, bouncing the baby on one hip in a futile attempt to get him calm. Doesn’t help that she’s so frustrated she feels like crying, too.

**

Monday morning, she’s rooted to her desk chair, staring at Pete with unveiled contempt, speechless that he would have the utter gall to come into her office and *proposition* her in the name of saving this company. All because of his inability to close a deal.

“It seems to me that there could be something worth the sacrifice. We’re talking about a night in your life. We’ve all had nights in our lives where we’ve made mistakes for free.”

Semantics. He can phrase it as delicately as he wants, but it boils down to the same idea:

“You’re talking about *prostitution*!”

Pete leans forward in his seat in what is probably meant to be an artless gesture, haughty expression never leaving his face as he says:

“I’m talking about business at a very high level. Do you consider Cleopatra a prostitute?”

Cleopatra opened her bed to the most powerful men in the world. No matter how powerful or handsome this Jaguar executive is – and if he’s asking *this*, Joan’s sure he’s neither – a dealers’ association executive is no Marc Antony.

“She was a *queen*,” Pete presses, insistent. “What would it take to make you a queen?”

Men have tried, not that Pete knows that. They’ve whispered secrets against her skin in sinfully decadent hotel rooms, they’ve sent lavish tokens of their undying affection.

One thing she knows for certain:

“I don’t think you could afford it.”

She has a baby who needs to be fed and clothed, a mother who drinks too much, and a husband who’d love to see her ruined. Whatever meager prize Pete Campbell is offering, he can keep.

“I hope I haven’t insulted you,” he says archly as he stands. “That’s all that matters to me.”

Of course. He's asking this because he's concerned about her *well-being*.

“I understand,” she retorts. Anger pulses through her chest, sickly and dark, and as he closes the door
to her office she has to tell herself to breathe.

**

Joan takes a long lunch, though she doesn't eat a thing, just chain smokes in a diner for over an hour, nursing a cup of weak tea. When she returns, she picks up her messages from Bridget's desk, though the girl is nowhere to be found.

The real surprise comes when Joan pushes open the door to her office to find Lane sitting in one of the blue chairs. He turns to meet her eyes, one hand fidgeting noticeably on the armrests.

She freezes in the doorway, eyes wide.

How long has he been in here?

“I thought you were ignoring me,” she says, closing the door quietly behind her and shrugging out of her camel coat, hanging it on the rack along with her purse.

He lets out a nervous breath, lifting one shoulder in a shrug.

“I don't mean to intrude, but it's...important.”

Dodging her observation. Joan raises an eyebrow. To an untrained eye, it might seem as if he's here to apologize, but if the words actually leave his lips she'll eat her pocketbook.

She sits down behind her desk, lighting another cigarette out of habit, and offering him the open pack as a kind of olive branch.

“Want one?”

He shakes his head no.

She takes a drag, exhaling smoke. There's a long silence, in which Joan puts her cigarette in the ashtray, Lane fiddles nervously with a thread on the cuff of his grey wool jacket, and finally blurts:

“You cannot trust Pete Campbell. No matter what he's...told you.”

Shock, dull and icy, washes over her.

“What exactly did he say?” she snarls, jumping to her feet. “Did he tell *all* of you?”

If Roger Sterling was a willing part of this discussion, she's going to kill him.

Lane holds up two hands, speaking very quietly and very quickly:

“He said he'd spoken to the others. He came to my office alone.”

For a moment, his expression must be a mirror of her own. Anger's visible in the set of his jaw and the flash of his eyes behind his glasses, but he visibly pushes it aside, saying, with a terrible calm:

“We don't need Jaguar that badly.”

She wants to scream at Lane to get out, to shut up, that this is absolutely none of his business, but on a whim decides this would mean letting him off too easy. He wants to talk honestly about this solicitation? He damn well deserves to squirm.
She folds her arms across her chest.

“We'll be bankrupt in a year if nothing changes.”

It's an exaggeration, yes, but it's not out of the question considering how tenuous business has been in the past few months.

Lane seems to take offense to this, and replies tersely:

“Then how do you imagine a bankrupt company might procure a fifty thousand dollar surplus? You know the books, just as I do. Tell me, where in the budget might such a sum possibly exist?”

“Reductive logic isn't going to work on me, Lane,” she retorts, while trying to absorb the shock of what he's just said. Fifty thousand dollars? Is that what's on the table?

Noticing the tension in her face, Lane continues, quietly this time:

“Then hear me when I say that as things stand, we cannot procure that kind of money. Not all at once, and perhaps not even once we've landed the account.”

Joan unfolds her arms in a slow, purposeful movement, taking a seat and placing her hands in her lap.

“We've got good credit. The bank likes us.”

She's clenching her hands in fists to keep her temper under control, and refrains from stating the obvious: that it's not about where they currently stand, but where they end up once the deed is done. They'll have the money eventually.

Lane's eyes widen. One of his hands taps out a nervous rhythm on the fabric-covered arm of his chair before he jumps up, beginning to pace beside her desk.

“All things considered, the bank could be convinced to extend a further line on our behalf. First: such an agreement predicates we must win the account to keep this company on even ground. It does not take into account the principal sum owed or the interest that type of loan would incur, or how a debt of that magnitude might be paid at a later time.”

For all his logic, he's deliberately skirting the point of this arrangement, Joan thinks, and for a strange, surreal moment she feels hysterical, almost like laughing. They'll win.

Otherwise, what would be the point?

She sets her shoulders.

“And second?”

Lane seems taken aback, and sputters out:

“Are you so convinced Campbell will honor any arrangement you make? For god's sake, Joan, you understand exactly the type of man he is!”

Joan arches an eyebrow, taking another drag of her cigarette. She's not under any illusions.

“He's a snake, but he's loyal to this company.”

“But not to those who work here,” Lane counters, with just a touch of bitterness in his voice. “And
certainly not to you, not on any level that matters. Even if the man could spearhead such an offer successfully, there is no guarantee he'll deliver on promises made along the way. He does not keep his word. He looks out for no one save himself. How on earth can you—"

She interrupts his tirade with a derisive noise of disagreement.

“Fifty thousand dollars is a lot of money!”

_Don't sit there and act like you wouldn't even consider it._

“And when, precisely, shall you receive it?” he snaps back, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck as he paces. “Next week? Next year? Has he given a definitive answer as to how such a payoff might occur?”

Joan doesn't respond, feeling embarrassment prickle hot in her cheeks. They haven't discussed the nuts and bolts of this proposition, because she hasn't technically given Pete a response to his proposal. She feels stupid for not insisting on concrete terms to begin with.

With her silence, Lane must realize his argument is gaining traction, because he stops pacing, as if he's too stunned to believe his luck, and turns to face her, voice low and intent:

“If we continue to be mired in such strict financial situations, you can't imagine Campbell might prioritize any amount you're owed over the sums required for continued operation of this company, or for salaries, or god forbid, pensions. And even if your...gamble succeeds,” he stammers over the last two words, “you must understand it may never reap the promised reward.”

All points that Joan did consider, but not in the kind of focused, minute detail Lane's describing. She doesn't want to admit she was distracted by her own personal frustrations, by the sheer fact that she was asked.

“It's a car,” she says after a moment, her words clipped. “I imagine Pete will honor any arrangement he can make to get it.”

An unspoken question twists around her statement: _will you?_ At the end of the day, Pete can broker this deal, but he won't be the one to deliver on the terms, to sign that check.

“Don't ask it of me, Joan,” Lane says in a rush, just as she's about to speak. He looks very pale and very pained. “Please. I – I can't. I don't – want to.”

As if asking for his straightforward opinion somehow makes this any worse. The die is cast; she's already been asked.

Least she has an answer now, between Lane's last outburst and this entire conversation.

Joan stares at him, openly, as if he's some kind of exhibit in a museum. His ramrod-straight posture. The strict, taut line of a muscle twitching in his clenched jaw, and a ruddy flush creeping up from under his collar. It's amazing he's managed to say anything persuasive at all, considering the way they've been tiptoeing around each other for weeks.

“Thing no one ever tells you about money is that it dries up,” he whispers as he meets her eyes, shame and fear tangling together in his fraught expression. “It _always_ dries up.”

It's not just about the money. It's all of it. The refrigerator. The baby. Roger. Pete. Her mother's stern glance as she curled Joan's hair in the mornings, before school. _So what if they look at you? They're men, Joanie. They're always going to look that way at a beautiful girl._
She'd tilt Joan's face toward the window to inspect her hair and makeup in the light. *You're lucky, you know. You could have been ugly.*

“You think I'm getting a raw deal,” Joan says flatly, and after a moment of horrified silence, Lane rubs a hand over his eyes, making a frustrated noise.

“Yes, that's precisely what I'm thinking,” he retorts sharply, sarcasm infused in every word. “The unfairness of the current arrangement, rather than the fact that such an arrangement exists. But if you're seriously considering terms, why settle for for fifty thousand? Hang the lot and buy a partnership stake: start with five percent, push the rest of us out by Easter.”

Full partner, Joan thinks dully. There'd be more security in a stake than in money.

But he clearly meant to mock her. It wasn't a serious suggestion.

Panic is evident on Lane's face, and he's moving closer to her chair, one hand curling around the lip of her desk as he speaks with an obvious urgency. She's not really hearing the words.

“—got to provide for your son, but you mustn't—”

Is she supposed to be disgusted by the idea?

Money comes with conditions. And she wouldn't get it right away. But even with as little as a five percent share, she might just emerge holding the strings.

Could she give up one night for that?

Joan blinks, returns to herself, and finally looks at Lane, meeting his terrified stare, but she can't divine the message underneath the fear.

Well, he's the one who suggested raising the stakes.

“Five percent,” she says, willing her voice not to shake. It doesn't.

Lane curses, and his expression slams closed, but he closes his mouth before he can say anything else, turning toward the door with a defeated, palpable unhappiness.

He pauses just before the doorway, his hand poised over the knob. “I never—”

“Stop apologizing,” Joan interrupts, voice sharp. Sorry is probably the next word out of his mouth, and more apologies won't change the situation. She's so goddamn tired of talking.

“Right,” Lane says in a monotone, exhaling a puff of air that borders on a humorless laugh. “Not enough, is it?”

He pulls the door open, walks out. It closes behind him with a quiet click.

**

An hour later, Joan's sitting at her desk, smoking her way through the rest of her Pall Malls when Peggy sweeps into the office without even a knock, slamming the door behind her.

“What,” Joan snaps at the other woman, less a question than a pointed comment. Today, of all the days in this office, she just wants to be left alone. She told Bridget to hold her calls.

Peggy slants her a furious look in response, plunking down in one of the chairs with a huff and
letting her gaze drift to the pack of cigarettes in Joan's hand.

Joan slides it across the desk without a word. If she can sit here and shut up, Peggy can stay. If not, they're going to have a problem.

She notices absently that Peggy's plaid yellow skirt is wrinkling at the waist. Probably due to the way she's slumped. And her once-crisp white shirt has a tiny spot of food near the collar. She should go home and change, or people won't take her seriously.

Peggy flicks the lighter closed and tosses it back onto Joan's desk with a clattering sound, taking a long drag of her cigarette and exhaling smoke in a hiss.

“They're all assholes,” she says loudly.

*Everyone knows that,* Joan wants to say, but doesn't have the energy to comment, and just raises her eyebrows in response to the other woman's outburst.

Peggy takes the silence as tacit permission to speak.

“I'm juggling the entire company, and all they're doing is writing tags for that stupid car.”

After another moment:

“They're not even good.”

As if this only adds insult to injury. Like Peggy doesn't care how badly she's treated as long as the work shines. She's so young. Joan doesn't know whether to be glad for her or to pity her.

She takes another drag of her cigarette, and concentrates on keeping quiet. If she gets worked up, she won't be able to stop herself from yelling.

Peggy seems taken aback by the silence, shooting Joan a look that's half offense and half concern, but continues to speak, like if she says another sentence, or lands on some precise combination of words, it'll magically provoke a reaction.

“Do you know how many phone calls I've gotten from Chevalier in the last two days? They're jittery. They want to rework the entire campaign.”

Joan breathes in and out. This conversation is going in circles.

Peggy's staring at her with a nervous air, now – apprehensive, like she's finally realized something's wrong. She leans forward in her chair, searching Joan's moody expression.

“I thought...maybe you'd...have some suggestions, but I can——”

“I don't,” Joan says dully.

Peggy looks as startled as if she's been slapped. Joan lets her eyes slide over the other woman's gobsmacked expression and repeats, with pointed emphasis:

“I don't know.”

That's the truth, and it's as much as she can muster without losing her temper completely.

Peggy's mouth drops open slightly, as if to speak, but no words slip out. Like she's dumbstruck, like it's so unbelievable. For god's sake, Joan wants to say. I'm not an oracle. I'm not your mother.
“Believe it or not,” her voice is loud and razor-sharp, “I don’t have the answers to all of your problems. If something’s wrong, stop complaining to me and just **fix it.**”

Joan refrains from saying Don and the others probably won't notice anything that doesn't come out of their own heads. In the end, they don't care about anyone but themselves.

Peggy gapes at her for what feels like a long time but must only be a few seconds. The cigarette is still burning between her two fingers, forgotten, ash dropping onto her skirt in a little clump. It'll leave a mark. Her pale eyes sweep over Joan's face, her clothes, her desk, as if they're trying to memorize every detail of the room and of this conversation. With anyone else, Joan might find this level of scrutiny odd, but this is Peggy. She's always been different, and Joan's too preoccupied to let this sudden strangeness disturb her, so she just lets it become par for the course.

The younger woman closes her mouth abruptly, and gets to her feet with her cigarette still in hand, walking quickly toward the hallway and not even bothering to close the door behind her on the way out.

Joan takes the silence and the open door as an excuse to stub out her own cigarette. She doesn't want to smoke right now. In fact, she needs to speak to someone.

**

Seeing the shock bloom across Pete's face as she tells him *I want to be a partner. Not silent.** It isn't satisfying, per se, but a feeling close to conviction surges through Joan's veins with the declaration. It's worth something to see him so surprised and disaffected, so easily stripped of his schoolboy pretensions. Clearly, he underestimated her.

Yes, she thinks, watching him scramble to deliver on her terms, there is power in this.

After the ink is dry on her contract, after she's face to face with Herb Rennet — or, to be more exact, when he says *let me see 'em* in a gravelly voice, and she turns her back to him like she's some green girl with a handsy, impatient beau—

—and the gut emotion of what this evening will require threatens to overwhelm her—

Joan concentrates on that earlier thought, that hazy ghost memory of conviction. She's doing this for her family. It's only one night.

Her hands still tremble as she pushes her dress down her shoulders.

**

Pete bursts into her office through the back door. Joan abruptly drops the file she's holding, and swivels in her chair to look at him.

“We got the call,” he says in a rush. “Come on.”

Not bothering to mask his excitement. He's like a child on Christmas morning. Joan takes in his thrilled expression and gets up from her chair in one fluid motion, smoothing the skirt of her aqua dress and indicating that she'll follow him.

Pete demurs, holding out one hand in a beckoning motion.

“After you. I insist.”
She’s surprised at the warmth in his voice. It sounds, strangely enough, like pride.

Joan walks quickly down the hall, heels clicking against the tile as she moves, and slips into Roger’s office with all the breezy confidence she can muster. The others are already assembled: Roger leaning against his desk, phone in one hand, Cooper on the sofa, Lane by the drink cart, and Don, just to the right of the open doorway.

As she files in, Don shoots her a furtive look that's part surprise, part shame, and she stares back at him, unyielding, until he averts his eyes. She's just saved this company from another year of Sisyphean hell. It made her a partner. Joan refuses to let the rest of them make her feel small. They're not choirboys. What the hell can they say about it?

Suddenly, Roger's hugging Don, and Pete's grin lights up his entire face, and Joan lets her gaze drift to Lane, who's staring at her as if they haven't seen each other in years. As if studying her face will give him a clue as to how he should react to this news.

She's crossing the room with open arms before she can second-guess the impulse, drawing Lane into a brief hug. The only thought that comes to mind is that he's taller than she remembers. She barely has to stoop to put her arms around his shoulders.

His hands press into her shoulders for a brief second, and as she pulls away, she tries to meet his eyes with a small, if tremulous, smile. As he draws back, it's clear he's embarrassed by the scrutiny - he can barely look at her - but his lips turn up slightly in an awkward attempt at reciprocation.

The expression on his face as she puts careful distance between them still gives her pause. Was it forgiveness, when he'd hugged her? Was it an apology?

In the moment, Joan can't put a finger on why not knowing bothers her so much, and later, she doesn't even have time to try. Champagne's already flowing in the conference room, and she flits from person to person with a full cup in her hand, forcing herself to pay attention to what her coworkers are saying. Mostly just glad for the barrage of distractions.

Out of the corner of her eye, Joan notices a purple-clad figure slipping quietly into reception, carrying her thermos under one arm and her portfolio under the other, and has to suppress an eyeroll. Peggy should at least have stayed for a drink. Nobody likes a sore loser.

Chapter End Notes

Finally, a real update! I struggled so much writing this storyline -- as my beta can tell you -- because I was agonizing over whether I wanted Joan to make partner via sex with Jaguar the Hutt. In the show, it never struck me as completely out of character for Joan to consider that offer, since the stakes were about as high as she imagined they'd get, but YMMV, and I think we can all agree the setup for that scenario in-episode was weak at best. Hopefully it's better here, but if it isn't, drop me some feedback anyway!
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

_Snip._

Pause. Sigh.

_Snip._

Every slice of the scissors is maddening. Even from behind his newspaper, in the armchair on the opposite side of the living room, the constant pattern of noise irritates Lane in a way few other sounds could. What on earth is Becca doing? He imagines she's taken up some sort of new creative project, but hesitates to inquire what it might be or why she's done it. She'll only get angry with him once he asks how much it cost.

_Snip._ Accompanied by a slight tearing sound, and a small frustrated _hm._

Lane's read the same sentence several times over, unable to digest a word of of the article in front of him, but still takes offense as the paper is suddenly whisked from his hands and Rebecca bustles away with it, toward the coffee table.

“I was _reading_ that,” he says through gritted teeth.

His wife shoots him an impatient look.

“Calm yourself. You'll have it back in a moment.”

Lane exhales loudly, wanting to tell her that he _is_ calm, but doesn't voice the sentiment, replying instead with a crabby:

“Why do you want it, anyway?”

Rebecca neither reads the _Journal_ nor any other newspapers, deeming the American press “very vulgar.” She prefers to get her news from radio. They're able to pick up the BBC.

“It's Tuesday,” she snaps. “Mrs. Fairbender and I had tea. I just _told_ you.”

He doesn't recall this at all, nor does he understand why this is an important factor in a discussion about newspapers.

Rebecca purses her lips, obviously upset, but after a pause, she assumes a more placid expression, focusing her attention on her work and continuing to speak with such determined cheer it makes Lane wonder if his hearing's gone, as well as his sight.

“She showed me the article about your new chairmanship. Which you never mentioned.”

_Snip._ The blade slices through the middle of a page, and Rebecca turns the lot in her hands, cuts another sharp corner. Lane can't help but wince.

“I suppose it was surprising.”

She scoffs at his reticence, but her expression stays focused on a square fragment of paper, now
attached to the greater sheet by one dangling corner.

“Any normal person might be proud of their accomplishment.”

She sets the clipping aside, placing the remaining pages in a neat pile by the edge of the table. Is that the announcement? Is she planning to keep it? He doesn't know what to say.

Lane can visualize the headline as if it's in front of him still: 4As, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7. Nothing more than a list of names and corresponding agencies. No mention of the responsibility of a financial chairmanship, or the rigors of their selection process.

To be frank, her reaction is surprising.

Lane lets out a breath, hesitant to point this out.

“You realize it only means more time spent apart.”

It's meant to be a simple acknowledgment of an earlier complaint, but instead of coming across as an observation, the comment turns sour in the air. And while his mind is shouting you've got to fix it, Lane has no idea where to begin. Surely she doesn't want to hear the same excuses. They had this very argument over the weekend. Afterward, she didn't speak to him for twelve hours.

Rebecca stares at him as if he's lost his mind, eyes narrowed, her thin mouth drawn into a deep frown. This is an expression Lane knows all too well. He huffs out a sigh, averting his eyes in an unspoken apology, and they lapse into silence.

After a moment, she stands, moving across the room and pushing the remaining pages into his hands without a word, retreating toward the master bedroom.

Lane opens them only to discover the section he was reading has been cut away, the first sentence lost to a void of open space shortly after the words interest rates.

**

Inside the main ballroom of the Plaza is a swarm of men in suits. The 4As is hosting a regional three-day conference in the city and has strongly encouraged its local members to attend. As incoming financial chair, Lane is required to attend a few seminars and ensure the quarterly reports, which are to be distributed, are in order. Fortunately, the outgoing chair Mr. Buckley has already taken care of this. Unfortunately, Lane is still required to visit with the masses. Despite the fact that they're all higher-ranking financiers, less boorish than salesmen or accounts men or juniors in general, two days in and it's still a nightmare of handshaking and attempting to remember names and laughing at jokes he's heard several times over.

Serving as a sort of ambassador, Mr. Buckley taps his arm when they arrive at the group a few feet from the mahogany bar, and gestures toward three men standing apart from the crowd. One of the men is short, pale, and rather bald, another is large, red-faced, and light-haired, and the third is dark-haired, very tan. Lane sees this last man in his blue suit and loud tie and thinks very suddenly of Roger Sterling.

“Lane Pryce,” Jim says, gesturing to the others, “want you to meet Tom Martin, George Mercer, and Bill Vaughn. All committee men, so you'll see a lot of 'em in the next few months. Gentlemen, you're looking at our new chair. The man is a wizard.”

“Oh. Well, I don't know about all that,” Lane says between greetings, shaking each of their hands in turn.
The light-haired man – was it Tom? George? – grins at him, claps him on the shoulder.

“How's it feel to be homecoming king?”

Lane stares at him, baffled.

Everyone stares back before the original speaker bursts into raucous laughter. “Look at this guy! Doesn't even blink!”

Now they're all laughing. Someone starts telling a story about their school days. Lane tries to smile in all the right places, tries to summon up the proper enthusiasm, but even this level of effort is tiring, and eventually someone presses a drink into his hand - whiskey. He settles for drinking and listening in silence.

**

He drinks too much – far too much – stumbles into a cab with his head spinning and arrives home only to find Rebecca in her best furs. Of course he tries to talk her out of dinner – he can't go back out in this state, not after the day he's had – but she coos at him and cajoles him and even compliments him. *I'm so proud of you.* It's been so long since she said anything of the sort that he can't bear to refuse her. Thinking of the truth, he feels the heavy press of guilt pounding in his temples and in his jaw but she's looking at him with such eagerness that he lets her lead him away. He's nearly convinced himself that he can make it through the evening when they get to one end of the garage and Rebecca suddenly blurts, “I thought racing green.”

Gesturing to a shining Jaguar parked by itself in the corner, and producing from her pocket a leather key fob with several small brass keys.

His stomach jumps into his throat, tears spring to his eyes, and he feels ill all over, cold and dizzy and sick but she's smiling at him and laughing as if this surprise is the best thing to have happened to her in months. *You never spend on yourself, always for my travel or Nigel's schooling.* He can't even bear to listen to her justifications, all he hears are his own lies borne back to him on someone else's lips.

“Sit in it,” she urges, flashing him a smile.

Lane can't look at it anymore. He stumbles away from the car, gloved hand briefly pressed to his mouth, and makes it around the corner before doubling over and retching, clutching the cement post for support.

“Oh, dear,” he hears Rebecca say.

**

It's been an hour, and Lane's rinsed out his mouth twice, but he can still taste the bile in his throat. He's sitting on the sofa with his head in his hands. Though this hunched position makes his back ache, it was the only one, initially, that kept his head from spinning. He's not ready to give it up just yet.

Rebecca's changed out of her furs but is still wearing her red dress, pacing in front of the window, the way she always does when she's excited.

“Now, darling,” she says in a brisk voice, as if watching one's spouse sick up in a carpark is everyday business, “I realise you don't much feel like driving tonight, but I thought we could take the car out tomorrow.”
Lane makes a mumbling noise that could hopefully be construed as “no.”

“We ought to make a day of it,” she continues. “Perhaps leave the city.”

“Becca—” he begins, lifting his head, but she's ignoring him.

“I should like to go upstate,” she sighs, casting a wistful glance out the window. “Or perhaps a little further. Of course, we'll have to wait until Easter for a real holiday, but since our situation is improved—”

Lane winces at the implication, and speaks more loudly than intended.

“Don't use that word.”

A raise of her eyebrows and the sudden pursing of her mouth indicates she has heard him, but she continues as if his sudden outburst was no more than a throat-clearing.

“Lane, darling,” she says, voice still very hopeful as she comes to sit beside him, “I know you'd still like us to be cautious, but surely there's no reason why we can't begin to make...small adjustments? It doesn't need to be a true—” and here, she demurs, as if concerned for possible offense: “holiday.”

Lane feels a spike of irritation surge through him.

“There is a difference between small adjustments and what you're proposing. A holiday of any duration is expensive. Out of the question.”

“Honestly,” she huffs, waving one hand in a dismissive motion. “We'll be all right. You worry too much.”

“You don't,” he replies flatly. “You bought a car.”

Rebecca's expression morphs from irritation to shock. Lane immediately realizes his mistake, reaching out for her hand, but the moment his fingers brush hers, she pulls back.

“You don't like it,” she whispers, turning pale.

Her lower lip wobbles, and Lane fears the worst once she turns away, covering her mouth. He knows what he should say to rectify the situation. Of course I like it. Why wouldn't I like it, when you've bought it for me? We'll take it out now. We'll take it out tomorrow.

The words turn to ash on his tongue. He can't bring himself to do it.

“It isn't that I don't like it,” Lane begins carefully, but even if these were the right words, they're far too late to soothe the looming storm, and Rebecca turns back to him with a look of contempt, eyes bright:

“You can be so unfeeling!”

Lane recoils from her words, and the pounding in his head returns full-force.

“I get you a gift and you tell me you hate it!”

He focuses on the table in front of him, staring at the clawed foot.

“How could I hate your gift if I'm unfeeling?” Lane replies through clenched teeth, trying to breathe through the pulsing in his temples.
She scoffs at his misery, getting up to pace in front of him.

“You know, we never have nice things anymore—it’s always scrimping and saving and making *adjustments* while the rest of our friends do whatever they like—”

“—no, do go on, I love listening to how well our friends are doing—”

“—we have lived on austerity for over two *years* and I only thought—”

“It was a *necessary measure*—” Lane interrupts, feeling anger coil in the pit of his stomach, but she pretends not to hear him, one hand cutting through the air as she talks over him.

“What kind of person wants to return a gift bought by their *wife*?”

“It is a very *expensive* gift!” Lane snaps. “I don’t even drive here!”

Her eyes widen, and she closes her mouth with a pop.

“Well, you used to,” she says primly, “when we were in London.”

Lane exhales loudly.

“We’re not *in London*, Rebecca—”

“Yes, I realise that, Lane, not least because you *continue* to remind me,” Rebecca answers, ice in every word. “Honestly, how difficult would it be to bring this household up to the same standard now that we’ve the money—?”

“Standard?” Lane echoes, head snapping up to stare at her. “You—I’ve been keeping up *two* households for *five years*! Have you any idea what that *means*? It’s—you’re off—redecorating and buying cars while Inland Revenue breathes down our bloody necks!”

Her mouth hangs open in shock.

“Inland Revenue?”

He puts his head in his hands.

“They taxed—an investment. A...personal investment...in the company. Had to liquidate my portfolio to procure it.”

After a moment, he's able to look up, gauge her expression. She's staring at him with dawning comprehension.

“How much did you *invest*?” she says in a low voice, biting off each word, and he winces, turning away again.

“I can explain,” he begins, but she speaks over him, forceful:

“I don’t want you to *explain*! Tell me what you gave them!”

He covers his eyes, not wanting to look at her.

“Fif—fifty thousand dollars.”

She’s quiet for so long he does look up, sees her jaw set and eyes closed before she opens them,
cutting a glare in his direction.

“You wouldn't let me open the mail.”

“Becca—”

“You told me you were taking care of it—”

“No, you don't understand—we were facing real trouble—I couldn't very well say no, it was the only way—”

“All this time—you lied to me?”

The silence is damning.

“I – I'm sorry,” he stutters out. How does he even begin to explain? “It was foolish, I know that now, only I—I thought I was doing what was best. I never meant—I didn't know how to tell you. I didn't even know they had taxed it till a few months ago.”

How was he supposed to admit something so shameful?

Her stare is fixed on him.

“Last year, my parents told me I was childish for leaving,” she says after a long silence, her voice quiet but firm. She's twisting her wedding ring around her finger in an unsettling motion.

His throat tightens in anxiety, but he stays quiet.

“The night I arrived, Mama got so hysterical she had to lie down.”

Lane knows this is not inconsequential. Rebecca's mother isn't prone to maudlin displays. She barely even wept at their wedding.

Rebecca looks him up and down with narrowed eyes, as if she's committing him to memory, to some part of her mind she never wants to access.

“I should never have let you talk me into coming back.”

Giving him one last look of contempt before getting to her feet.

Shock keeps him seated for a second too long. His throat is tight with panic – heartbeat tattooing a frantic rhythm against his chest as he follows her toward the master bedroom.

“Wait,” he sputters, trying to get to her before she can slam the door in his face.

But Rebecca bypasses it completely, walking instead to the closet at the opposite end of the bedroom and yanking open the French doors. She pulls out a powder blue suitcase by the handle, using both hands, wrestling it through the clothes on hangers and depositing it on the bed with a muffled thump. She immediately begins to fuss with the latch.

“What are you doing?” he asks in a dull voice, staring at her hands as she flings open the lid. She doesn't answer, just crosses the room to pull open a drawer on the bureau. Out comes a pile of underthings – slips and garters and nylons and nightgowns – which she deposits into the suitcase in a heap. After a moment of consideration, she returns to the bureau, pulling open another drawer and examining its contents before pulling out two jumpers. She doesn't even bother to push it closed.
“Becca, stop this,” Lane says in a panic, hurrying to take her free arm. She stiffens immediately, looking away from him as if she can will herself to be gone with a single thought.

“You have to understand—I thought it was better for you not to know. I didn't want you to worry.”

“Worry?” she says, and she does look at him now, her mouth twisting in a mocking sort of way. “You didn't want me to know you'd failed.”

Yanking her arm from his grasp and tossing the jumpers into the suitcase.

“I—” Lane blurts, suddenly feeling a little faint, “no, that wasn't—”

She whirls around—

“I don't care what it was!”

He pulls back as if he's been slapped, but Becca continues:

“I told you four years ago no partnership was worth this. They never wanted you. They never even liked you!”

“I understand you're angry,” he mutters, flushing, but she interrupts him—

“You said things were going well, you said you'd been instrumental in the company's success, when all the while you were counting pennies.”

“That isn't true,” he begins, “our accounts—”

“Oh, yes,” she hisses, “your precious accounts. Don't think I don't know what those men want when they come to the city. They want to have fun, they want to be entertained. I am well aware what they receive from your company.”

“Becca, I would never—take part in that. I have never—”

“No, of course you wouldn't. Why would they ask you?”

She makes a hissing noise that is somewhat like a laugh, covering her mouth with her hand, then uncovering it only to whisper:

“It's never going to be any better. It's always the same. Money and the company and New York—and you never take my side!”

“That's not true,” Lane interrupts. “It isn't—just—tell me what you want.”

Her iron gaze seems to tear through him, and she snorts out a breath.

“It's too late,” she says dully. “Even in the beginning—you never knew.”

His face burns hot with shame, and he can feel the emotion rising in his chest, struggling for release, but Lane tries to hold it in all the same.

“Becca,” he says, and his voice cracks ominously as he speaks. “It isn't, if you only—I'll do whatever you ask. I promise. You don't have to leave. Please.”

She says nothing, eyes flickering toward her open suitcase, and walks quickly toward the hallway. He follows her, grabbing her free hand just as they get to the doorway of Nigel's room. The tightness
in his chest increases, and his face crumples with pent-up emotion.

“Becca, please don't go.”

He begins to cry: ugly, short sobs that rack his body, and flings himself around Rebecca's shoulders, weeping into her chest like an inconsolable child.

Her body stiffens in his desperate embrace, arms braced at her sides, but even this can't stop him from clinging to her, and after a moment, she's struggling to free herself.

“Let go of me, Lane—”

“Please don't leave me,” he wails, knees wobbling so badly he has to kneel in front of her, grabbing her around the legs as if he's a terrified child.

“Let go,” she demands, pushing at his shoulders and face. “Stop it.”

He won't be moved. “For god's sake, what am I supposed to do??”

As she struggles to get free, the back of her hand suddenly catches him in the nose. He recoils with a whine, glasses going askew, his hands coming up to cradle his face, and she stumbles backwards, back pressed against the wall next to the closed door of Nigel's bedroom, one shaking hand gripping the doorframe. Looking at her pale face, at the obvious fear in her dark eyes, he cries even harder. Oh, god, what has he done?

Her last two knuckles are smeared red. Her mouth works as she whispers:

“Leave me alone!”

Walking quickly down the hallway, slamming the door to their bedroom, and locking it behind her. He can hear her picking up the telephone.

Dazed, unable to move, Lane sinks into a sitting position on the carpet. Blood and tears and mucus run down his face and neck. He can't go after her. He can't even stop crying, and eventually he just lies down in the middle of the hallway, turning onto his side and covering his face, weeping into his hands.

Her suitcases are gone, along with most of her clothes, but the rest of her things litter the apartment: pictures, trinkets, cosmetics. Her grandmother's china and silver gleaming in the display cabinet. She didn't take it. Worst of all, the night table by their bed still has all her things on it – pair of reading glasses, handwritten notes, pictures, right down to the earmarked book she was reading two nights ago. As if she were coming back at any moment.

Lane would do something about it, but he's so tired. He can't tell if it's been five hours, or two, or ten since he woke up on the floor, but when he did, the apartment was empty and her suitcases were gone. He crawled back into the rumpled bed, and only left to grab a half-full whiskey bottle from the living room. Long gone now. Empty bottle at the end of the bed.

She left, and she's taken Nigel with her.

*You will not live in between.*

His fault. He should have done more. He should have said more.
You never knew.

She hates him. He hates himself for not being able to see it.

God, he's such a fool.

**

Just before lunchtime, Joan strides up to Scarlett's desk, inclining her head toward Lane's door, her arms full of paperwork.

“Is he in?”

“Oh – no, he's still with the 4As,” Scarlett says slowly, wrinkling her brow. “He's not back till Monday.”

“Scarlett,” Joan says, with a lift of one eyebrow, “it ended today. They don't convene on Friday.”

“No,” Scarlett says, looking down at her calendar. Joan can see the neat scrawl of "4As - Regional" running parallel to the edge in blue ink. “I know that, but it's – I think they needed him for chairmanship things. He didn't call. I'm sorry.”

Joan suppresses a noise of disgust. Of course he wouldn't call to update anyone.

“Fine,” she replies sharply, placing a hefty folder onto Scarlett's desk. “When he gets back, tell him I've got the spreadsheets ready, and give him these reports. They're marked.”

Scarlett nods, jots something on a post-it note.

“Right away. Of course.”

**

Tuesday afternoon, the partners meet to revisit the issue of commission structures versus fee structures. Joan produces the required papers from her folio, sliding the first across the table toward Lane and the second toward Mr. Cooper and the rest of the partners – a spreadsheet document stating which companies are paying the highest commissions throughout the fiscal year, and what they've paid over the course of their history with the agency.

They've been discussing this topic for weeks, after Jaguar's initial request was made, but while Lane argued vehemently against fee structures a month ago, to the point of being annoying, today he's in a fog. He hasn't spoken at all. He isn't even looking at anyone, just staring at his papers on the table.

Joan glances over at him, briefly, while walking the others through the document. Maybe he's under the weather. He was pale and withdrawn on Monday, but seems worse today, with bloodshot eyes, and face and hair a little greasy. She even saw him coughing earlier. She also saw Pete edge his chair two inches to the left just after it happened, looking nervous. Maybe it's fever, or the flu.

She finishes her summary of the points in question, preparing for a final vote on the matter, but Lane's reluctance to speak on the matter is making her uncomfortable, so she prompts him.

“Lane? Anything to add?”

He stares at the papers for little more than a few seconds, with glassy, indifferent eyes, before turning back to the rest of the partners.
“No,” he says, and rises from the table with a half-shrug. “Sorry.”

With that, he gathers his things in one hand and exits the room. He pushes open the glass door and it emits a creaking sound as it slowly shuts in his wake.

Joan stares after him, mouth open in stunned silence. He's walking out on a vote?

Roger's wearing a bemused expression. “Huh.”

Pete snorts out a laugh, shutting his notebook. “Well, I assume we're finished? I'm very busy today.”

“No,” Joan says sharply, recovering her power of speech just as Cooper nods his head and says, “Of course. We'll reschedule.”

Pete stares at the two of them for a moment, then continues to gather his things, casting a quick look at Don, across the table, standing up as he says:

“Don, I give you my proxy.”

Don exhales smoke in a surprised huff of amusement, watching Pete leave.

“We can do that?”

“Don,” Joan snaps. This isn't a laughing matter.

“Mrs. Harris,” Cooper says, holding up a placating hand, “given the situation, it would be more productive to postpone the discussion and the subsequent vote.”

“Of course, if everyone decides to participate,” Joan says snidely, with a sideways glance at the hallway beyond the glass wall. What the hell has gotten into Lane? He was the one who fought for keeping the commissions structure in the first place. He wouldn't just walk out before a vote, even if he was sick.

“Joanie,” Roger says around a newly-lit cigarette, causing Joan to turn her attention back to the rest of the group. “You really want to do this now?”

“I did,” Joan snaps, casting him a withering look. She tosses her stenography pad onto the desk, giving up the ghost of productivity. The room's already half-empty.

Scarlett's scribbling furiously on her notepad, trying to take down the rest of the minutes before everyone walks out. Joan spares a glance for the younger woman as she moves past her chair and rolls her eyes. Even written in shorthand, those notes are complete gibberish. Just knowing they're illegible is infuriating.

She strides up to Lane's door, knocks very loudly once, then turns the knob.

The desk is a mess, and papers from the meeting are stacked haphazardly on the side table by the door – sliding off onto the arm of the sofa and the floor, actually – not to mention, his briefcase is still here, but his hat and coat are gone. He's nowhere in sight.

Why would he just leave? Why wouldn't he say anything?

She closes his door, slams the door to her own office, sits down, and lights a cigarette, furious and embarrassed and uneasy. The look on his face before he left.

What is wrong with him?
And you thought I had abandoned this fic! It's been a crazy few months for me on the work front, but I have had a little more time to write as of late, and finally got this chapter finished and posted. I hope to start posting regularly again soon.

If anyone out there's still reading, hope you enjoy the update!
The telephone rings.

Joan rolls to her left and reaches for the receiver, clumsy. Her feet tangle in the blankets as she moves. The hands on her square-faced clock glow green in the darkness, and she squints to look at them as she rasps out a hello. Three-fifteen.

“Mrs. Harris?”

Bert Cooper's gravelly voice is unmistakeable.

Joan bolts upright, fear gripping her heart with icy fingers. “Yes.”

“I apologize for the hour, but we have a situation.”

“What's going on?” she asks, her mind beginning to race through the possibilities. Is something wrong with Jaguar? Is something wrong with Roger?

Mr. Cooper exhales loudly.

“Lane tried to kill himself this evening. He was found in his car two hours ago.”

Joan blinks, and presses the heel of her free hand to her temple, as if this will help her think.

“What?”

Her mouth works soundlessly for a moment. He tried to—my god. She imagines blood-spattered windows. A razor. A gun.

“At present, he’s still alive.”

Alive. She draws in a ragged breath, mentally repeating the word until it blurs into a stream of babbling nonsense. Alive.

Mr. Cooper's still speaking, his voice quiet and calm. “The partners are convening, of course.”

Joan nods, blankly, then realizes he cannot see her through the phone. “Of—of course. I'll be right there,” and lets the receiver slide from her fingers, fall to the mattress. She has to get up. She has to do something.

Sweat beads on her forehead – she feels dizzy – oh, god, she's going to be sick. Joan barely makes it to the trash in time, knocking over a lamp in her rush. The crash wakes the baby, who starts to
scream. Shrill wails tear at Joan's ears, but all she can do is slump over the trash can, right hand gripping the lip of the dresser, until the nausea passes. After a minute, Joan hears, rather than sees, her bedroom door open. When she finally wipes her mouth on the back of her hand, moves to a standing position, her mother's staring at her from the doorway, one hand curled around the door frame.

“What happened?”

Words burst from Joan in a desperate rush. “Will you watch the baby?”

Light fills the room, causing Joan to shield her eyes. She turns back to the dresser, pulling open a second drawer. Her hands touch a bra, a pair of black leggings and a long-sleeved sweater, and Joan sheds her flimsy nightgown, pulls on the clothes with shaking fingers.

Her mother's voice is laced with curiosity. “Where are you going? Who was on the phone?”

“Someone's in the hospital. I have to go in.”

Joan ties her hair back with a green scarf, grabs her glasses, and slips into her lowest pair of heels. No time to put on her face. There's powder and lipstick in her purse.

Her mother picks up Kevin from his bassinet, balances him in her left arm while cradling the telephone receiver between her face and right shoulder. Calling a cab, Joan guesses, and is temporarily grateful. She stares at her reflection in the mirror for one last moment, willing herself not to cry.

Once she grabs her purse and coat, and bustles into the cab, she leans against the closed car door, pressing her cheek to the freezing cold window, and watches the city pass by in a blur of streetlamps. Her mind spins with a thousand possible answers to one question:

*Why would he do this?*

**

She hurries through the glass door to reception and down the creative hallway, almost at a run. Lounge is empty. Conference room is empty. When she gets to Dawn's desk, she sees light streaming from the doorway of Roger's office, forces herself to slow her steps, then enters the room.

Mr. Cooper sits behind the desk, wearing a full set of intricately-patterned pajamas and a nightcap. His bathrobe is tied neatly around him, while his slippered feet are propped up on a second desk chair. There's a nearly-empty glass in front of him.

Roger, sitting in his usual spot on the sofa, has on a full suit – the same one he wore to work yesterday – but his clothes are visibly rumpled, as if they'd been slung somewhere on the floor between now and then.

Pete's standing by the drink cart. His hair is sticking up in the back, his blue cotton bathrobe is askew and he's missed the first button on his pajama top. He's so unkempt it looks as if he literally rolled out of bed and into the office. He seems to regret his disheveled appearance, fixing his button and making a hasty effort to smooth down his hair with one hand.

Joan casts a quick look around the room. Don still isn't here. Everyone else, she realizes belatedly, is staring at her. “Have we heard anything?”

Her voice is a little tremulous.
Roger shakes his head.

Pete crosses over from his place beside the bar, and presses a glass full of brown liquor into her hand. She takes it with a mumbled thanks, gulping down a large swallow of what turns out to be whiskey. Holding the tumbler awkwardly, Joan fixes her eyes on the rim, remembering Lane's pallor and bloodshot eyes the last day he'd been in. Had he been drinking? Was this a drunken impulse? Was it something he'd been planning?

A conversation she hasn't thought about in months leaps to her mind, an off-the-cuff remark suddenly taking new significance.

Even with my mother and the baby, I feel alone. I don't expect you to understand.

The sound of his voice had been steadying. It's home, but it's not everything. I do understand.

Joan knows how well loneliness can eat away at your resolve, but she's never, even on her worst day, thought of suicide as a viable option. She's fought so hard for everything she has. Worked to change situations once they became too awful to bear.

Why would Lane want to die?

"You're pale," someone's saying to her, and it's Roger. "You should sit down."

She obeys numbly, legs moving almost on their own accord, sits on the other end of the sofa, and sinks back into the cushions, staring at the corner of a Life magazine on the glass table in front of her.

"Come on," Roger murmurs to her, low. "Let me take you home."

A little hysterical laugh bubbles up inside of her, and she clamps her lips together to keep it from escaping. He didn't mean it like that. But she's exhausted and terrified, and the impulse to laugh is growing. She has to fight to push it down, sipping her drink before she answers, firmly:

"I'm staying."

His eyebrows raise in surprise, but he doesn't ask again, just turns, clears his throat, and directs his next question to Mr. Cooper. "You ever get hold of his wife?"

Cooper shakes his head. "As of an hour ago, the authorities were unable to reach her."

"It's 4AM," Joan says dully, her mouth falling open slightly as she registers this news. "Where the hell would she be?"

Pete's been pacing in front of the doorway, his movements jerky and agitated, bathrobe flowing behind him like an absurd cape as he walks, but suddenly he pauses. "She could be in England."

Although this is phrased as an observation, rather than a question, it's clear he's looking for reassurance on the theory.

Roger looks so confused it's almost comical.

"Didn't she already leave him once? Am I the only one who remembers that?"

Joan doesn't laugh. God knows Roger sees separation and divorce as a boon instead of a loss. She imagines it would be shattering for someone like Lane, who thrives on structure and tradition and things continuing on as they always have. Maybe he told Mrs. Pryce about the money. He was terrified to tell her. Joan feels herself growing pale at the thought.
“He would have...” she searches for words, and does not allow herself to say *he would have told* me. “For god's sake, we would have known.”

Pete's expression indicates that he's waiting for Joan to keep talking. “He didn't mention anything to you?”

She shakes her head. The thought that she *should have known* is one she attempts to suppress. But Pete just scoffs, as if her lack of knowledge is inconvenient at worst, and resumes his pacing.

“What did he do?” Joan asks, after a long silence. “Where did they find him?”

“Joanie,” Roger says, his tone warning.

She cuts him off with a raised hand, slanting a look at Mr. Cooper that begs him to understand.

“Did he drive somewhere? Was it at home?”

The old man sighs.

“A young man from the building was walking through the garage. According to the authorities, this person saw the rigged car, pulled Lane from it, and notified emergency services.”

“So it was gas,” Pete says, and Cooper inclines his head.

Joan's stomach churns with the thought. She imagines Lane walking out to the deserted garage, preparing the car as methodically as he does the expense reports – checking the hoses, the tailpipe, the windows. Getting in and turning over the engine like it was nothing, maybe putting on the radio as the car filled. Coughing and wheezing and choking—

Roger interrupts her train of thought. “You think he—”

“Stop,” she manages, turning away from the group, covering her mouth, and biting the inside of her cheek in an attempt to keep herself from sobbing. After several moments, she feels somewhat controlled, and turns back to the men, swiping a few stray tears from her face.

“Sorry,” Roger mutters to her, but she doesn't acknowledge it. She's staring at Pete, who's staring out the window, his face shadowed by the dim light streaming in from the city below.

Pete risks a glance at her, then clears his throat.

“What are we going to tell the clients?”

Roger's in the midst of lighting a cigarette. “Jesus, Campbell.”

But the younger man is unmoved. “They're going to find out. We have to send them *something.*”

Joan closes her eyes briefly, sees maple-paneled walls and the sea of gray-green typewriters from the old Sterling Cooper steno pool. Remembers typing out addresses in the near-darkness while she focused on Mr. Cooper's voice to keep from breaking down.

“Telegrams.”

Her eyes find Cooper's. His answering nod seems to indicate that he understands her meaning.

“Yes, but they can’t—” Pete closes his mouth with visible effort, attempting, it seems, to censor himself. “What *story* do we give them?”
Roger begins to laugh. The sound edges at Joan's frayed nerves, and she snaps:

“Why are you laughing?”

But it's subsiding almost as quickly as it began. “We tell them it's a heart attack.”

He turns to Joan with a grin, as if she should be smiling, too.

“New company. First one's on the house.”

Pete's staring at Roger, his blue eyes nervously wide. “I don't think you should joke about that.”

Roger shrugs as if to say *who cares*, but Joan can see the tension underneath his dark humor and attempts to ignore him. She glances back at Mr. Cooper.

“We'll need to call one of the girls for the clerical work. Maybe two.”

*CFO Lane Pryce has suffered heart attack. Stop.*

“What are you going to do?” Pete blurts out, apparently directing his question to Joan.

“Excuse me?”

If he's trying to say he thinks she should be typing telegrams, there's going to be a problem.

“Well,” Pete continues, “I assume you'll take over Lane's work?”

“Yes.” The fierceness of her answer takes her by surprise. “Why do you ask?”

He has the grace to look embarrassed, running a hand over the back of his neck.

“With the acquisition of Jaguar, there's been a very steep influx in business. If he dies, everything will need to be in order.”

*If he dies.* The words make her skin prickle cold.

She fixes the younger man with a steely glare, biting off each word. “I'll take care of it.”

“I'll offer Mrs. Harris my assistance, of course,” Mr. Cooper adds, and that is that.

The sound of approaching footsteps can be heard in the hallway, and Don appears moments later, dressed like it's a workday. His appearance is impeccable: crisp shirt and suit, not a hair out of place. He's even brought his briefcase.

She feels a violent surge of anger. He couldn't just show up.

Pete speaks first, voice snide, and it makes Joan smother a smile.

“You took your time.”

Don glances around the room, expression taut. “I was parking. Did I miss anything?”

“We're going with heart attack,” Roger says around his cigarette, lighting another one straight off the last, casting the butt aside, and exhaling in a jet of smoke. “See? You're caught up.”

Mr. Cooper's eyes follow Don from the doorway to the drink cart, mouth set in a thin line of disapproval. From her seat, Joan watches as Don pours four fingers of whiskey into a glass. At this
distance, she gets a glimpse of what he's trying to hide beneath his workday veneer. His face is
ashen, and his hand shakes slightly as he replaces the cap on the bottle.

A dark pulse of satisfaction thrums in her chest at the sight. He damn well ought to be upset. They
should have seen this. They should have known Lane was in trouble. The hair, the rumpled clothes,
the bloodshot eyes. The lack of interest.

Damn it, how could she have missed this?

**

Sunday, they operate with a basic skeleton staff to take care of the emergency clerical work and so
others will be there to answer telephones. Monday proves to be even worse. At least on the
weekend, on that first day, everything felt abnormal, and each person was affected by Lane's absence
whether they missed him or not.

Joan checked expense reports and finished two payroll cycles and updated the books and wrote up
quarterly reports and set traffic meetings and partners meetings for the next month in order to keep
ahead on her own work, in order to start doing Lane's. Late in the afternoon, Mr. Cooper also gave
gave her an overview of the company portfolio, and they continued working on the paperwork for tax
season.

She took four aspirin when she got home, not wanting to dream.

This morning, the current group of freelancers – so young they're practically children, and Joan has
never hated them more than she does right now – started cutting up in the lounge with creative as
soon as they arrived. The secretaries took coffee in the kitchen and gossiped among themselves. Joan
wanted to grab their cups from their hands and smash each and every one on the tile until they
stopped laughing and got it through their thick heads. One of their coworkers is seriously ill. He tried
to kill himself, not that they're aware. He could still die. What the hell is wrong with them?

All she can do is stay focused on the work. If she does that, she will not think about Lane, comatose
in a steel bed in a dingy room in intensive care. Is he in pain? Does he know that he's alone? She
doesn't want to think about it, but she can't stop. And every time she thinks about it, she feels her
throat tighten. He was unhappy. Why did she ignore that? Why did she assume he was fine? Why
didn't she just talk to him?

She works in her office with the doors closed, only leaving to confront people about shoddy work or
unprofessional behavior. She tries to convince herself that if she believes things will be fine, it will
eventually prove to be true. She's fine. Everything is fine.

**

Wednesday, she's practically stuck to the telephone. Lane's line rings off the hook, whether it's
people calling to leave messages, express their sympathies, or to get in touch with him about pending
business. Scarlett has to put several people through to Joan so someone can explain the situation.

“Heart attack,” the man on the other end manages, voice hoarse. “My god. Are you—when did it
happen?”

Joan tightens her grip on the receiver, attempting to keep her voice level.

“Saturday night. It's...obviously a shock.”

“Shock,” the man echoes, sounding as helpless as Joan feels. “Yeah. I mean, he was fine last week.
Met all the members—we went over everything. The guys loved him. They thought he was hilarious. He wasn't—I mean, he seemed great. We had a good time.”

Out of all the phone calls she’s fended for Lane over the past several days, telling people the agreed-upon story, this one is by far the worst. Jim Buckley seems genuinely distressed. Most of the people she spoke to sounded vaguely sympathetic, but generally inconvenienced. She’s embarrassed to admit she didn’t realize Lane was so popular with the 4As, though with the finance chairmanship, she should have guessed.

“I understand. I’m sorry to tell you.”

“No, it’s—I’m just glad I called. God. His wife’s probably a wreck. I know mine would be.”

Joan presses her lips together to keep from giving away even the slightest hint regarding Lane’s marital situation, but Mr. Buckley talks over any potential slip, musing aloud.

“You think he'd mind a visit? I mean, he's a private kind of guy. But maybe it would cheer him up. Can he see visitors?”

Panic rises so quickly Joan can practically feel it lodged in her throat. Absolutely not.

“No. He can't.”

“Oh,” the man continues, sighing. “Well, maybe I just ought to send him a card.”

She seizes this opportunity to redirect him, saying, “I'm sure he would appreciate that,” and gives him their mailing address.

They speak briefly about 4As business – Joan suggests he stay on for the beginning of Lane's term as chairman, or find an interim, as they won't know the full situation for several weeks. They also exchange contact information and discuss the financial work she'll be undertaking here. Before Mr. Buckley hangs up, he says:

“I'm just sorry to hear it, you know? Lane's a good guy. If you talk to him, give him my best.”

“Of course,” Joan says in a rasp, trying to push a traitorous thought from her mind. Lane might die before she can tell him anything, least of all hello. “Take care.”

**

Thursday, she has to go into Lane's office several times. It's usually to grab specialized documents pertaining to the finances, files containing all of Lane's notes.

She always keeps the door closed but unlocked. Each time she opens it and walks inside, the neatness of the room surprises her. Every surface is pristine – was pristine even on the first day. He’d deliberately organized his things. Four mostly-full whiskey bottles, his tea set, china water pitcher and a row of cut glasses are neatly arranged on the credenza. Work is sorted into three disparate stacks on his desk, kept together by a few paperweights. Joan’s had to take several files from the lower desk drawers, but still can't bring herself to open the long middle drawer, where he would keep odds and ends. It's too personal. It feels like an invasion of privacy.

A noise in the doorway makes Joan look up from the paperwork on the desk.

Mr. Cooper enters the room and closes the door behind him. “Mrs. Harris. May I have a word?”
Joan feels her stomach drop. If it were related to business, he'd have kept the door open.

“Of course.”

Cooper takes a seat in the chair across from Lane's desk.

“I've just received a call from the hospital.”

She steels herself for the worst. Her legs feel weak, and she puts a hand on the edge of the desk. God. He's dead. He can't be dead.

“They tell me Lane is awake. As of this morning.”

The cold shot of shock thrums through her body before her brain fully absorbs his words. Awake. Not dead. She swallows, tries to speak around the tightness in her throat. It's painful.

“How is he?”

Is he lucid? Does he remember what happened? Is he in pain? Is he upset?

Mr. Cooper steeples his hands across his abdomen. “Troubled, from what I'm told. But alive, which is welcome news. I understand the two of you are cordial.”

“Yes,” Joan says flatly. She feels idiotic, like her tongue is numb, and quickly tries to recover her senses. “It is good.”

Her next words tumble forth in a rush.

“He shouldn't be alone. The partners should visit. I'll organize a schedule—someone can go tomorrow.”

“They're holding him for psychological evaluation.” Cooper says, holding up a placating hand. “Seventy-two hours. Standard procedure for these situations.”

“Oh—of course.”

Even now, she's still so used to thinking about the chaotic rhythm of surgery and emergency room care that the idea of an evaluation never occurred to her. Of course that would happen. It's the next logical step. How could she be so stupid?

“Afterward, I think, would be appropriate,” Mr. Cooper says, rising from his chair, reaching out, taking her free hand and patting her wrist, not unkindly. Once he's left the room and closed the door in his wake, Joan turns, walks on dazed legs and sinks into Lane's desk chair. It rolls a little to the right, and she grabs the lip of the middle desk drawer just to steady herself.

The motion, small as it is, pulls open the drawer almost an inch. After a moment's pause, Joan allows herself to look down, to open it just a little wider.

The first object she sees scattered among the clutter is his spare pair of glasses, tortoise-shell brown, broken into two pieces. Snapped cleanly in half at the bridge. Joan traces over a jagged plastic edge with one finger. He never wears this pair, only the black ones. But he broke them on purpose.

She pulls her hand back, and slams the drawer shut.

Her eyes fill, and she presses a hand to her mouth to try and control herself, but this time she can't. A cry escapes her lips, followed by another, and another, and suddenly Joan's got her forehead pressed
against the dark wood, her hands balled next to her mouth, sobbing so hard she can't breathe. Lane wanted to die. She is his friend; she should have seen it. Why didn't she see it? How could she have failed him like this?

**

“Ah, cut her some slack,” Ken says to Stan, leaning against the creative doorway and glancing out into the hall, toward Joan's closed door. “With Lane in the hospital, she's got a lot going on.”

Stan snorts out an unamused noise.

“Doesn’t mean she gets to be a bitch. Yesterday, she made one of the freelancers cry.”

Ken huffs out a breath. “Look. I've worked with Joan for...ten years now. She tends to take out her stress on other people. Just keep your head down, do your work, and she won't get onto you. Trust me. It always passes.”

“Jesus,” Ginsberg says suddenly, pushing back from his desk, standing, and wheeling around to face them. “What the hell is that noise? It's making my skin crawl. Stan, are you the one doing that?”

He scoots his chair back and forth, experimentally with one hand, and shakes his head.

“Am I the only one hearing this?”

“No, I hear something,” Ken replies after a second of silence, and pushes the door shut with one foot to dim the noise from the hallway.

“Sounds like crying,” Stan says with a shrug, swiping eraser bits from his sketchpad with his left hand. “Maybe Joan got to another one.”

Ginsberg rolls his eyes, but Ken's mouth draws down into a frown, and he eyes the green sofa, steps up onto it before the others can move. It makes him tall enough to see over the partition. When he sees a red-haired figure hunched over Lane's desk, face buried in her hands, her shoulders shaking with visible sobs, he feels a sharp twinge of surprise mixed with guilt. One hand twitches at his side, and he steps down as quickly as he'd gotten up.

“It one of the girls?” Stan asks, not looking up from his work.

Ken clears his throat before replying. “Yeah.”

Ginsberg cuts Ken a kind of suspicious look, but manages to censor himself for once—if he really is suspicious—and says nothing apart from, “Jesus, I can't listen to it anymore. It's fucking upsetting.”

He stalks over to the record player, flips it on, and positions the needle in a random place. A loud guitar riff blares from the speaker.

Chapter End Notes

Even on normal working days, Joan has always carried more than her fair share of stress. Unfortunately, when things get turned up to eleven, she gets that stress out through a combination of attacking her work and sniping at other people's incompetence. See: Roger's heart attack, her last few days at the old Sterling Cooper,
etc. I wanted to have a chapter where we see how difficult it is for Joan to keep that mask of indifference on, and to keep her anxieties from affecting her work.
The walls are yellow and green. He aches all over. Hospital sheets scratch against his skin. And the doctors are always asking him questions.

“Do you know why you're here?”

“What year is it?”

“Do you know who the President is?”

“When did you begin to have suicidal thoughts?”

No.

Sixty...eight.

No.

Don't know.

**

“Hello, hello!”


They're smiling wide, teeth and everything, but the man can barely look at him. His narrowed eyes dart around the room as he rubs at the back of his neck, while the wife's smile turns to wide-eyed pity, red lipsticked mouth forming an O before she smiles again, not as wide as before.

“My goodness. Your color is...very high. I'm...sure that's a good sign.”

Lane sees the look she gives her husband. Doesn't want to be here. Both pretending.

She sets a square foil-covered dish on his empty bedside table. “Now, just so you know, I've made you a broccoli casserole, and I'm going to put it right here. You can enjoy it whenever you like. I won't need that dish back for several weeks.”

Her voice is so loud.

“Lovely,” Campbell ushers her to one of the two wooden chairs facing the bed, and sits down beside her. “I'm sure he knows we only wanted to stop by and give him our very best. Lane, I hope your doctors are treating you well? Bert tells me this is an excellent hospital.”

Lane turns his head to stare out the window, not wanting to answer.

There is a very long silence.

The wife speaks again, voice quieter than before. “Lane, h—he has Peter told you our latest story about Tammy? It's absolutely adorable. You've just got to hear it.”
Seated in a wooden chair, the old man steeples his hands over his stomach, watching Lane with sharp eyes. “You'll have medical leave, of course. Whatever you feel you require.”

“Trust me, you ought to take four weeks. Or six.” Roger's at the window, one hand opening the blinds so he can peer through them. “Two is bad. That's experience talking.”

A pause. “Least you can eat whatever you want.”

There's a sharp, screeching noise, and suddenly the plastic comes apart from the window. Roger jerks back as the blinds crash down onto the sill and floor. Lane wrenches his head away, to the left. The sun's so bright, but it's the sound that's worse—tearing at his ears, driving into his skull. Throbbing. Throbbing. He squeezes his eyes shut.

“Shit. Was that my fault?”

“For god's sake, Roger. Get the nurse.”

“Do you know why you're here?”

“No.”

“Do you know what year it is?”

“Sixty...eight.”

“Do you know who the President is?”

“...Jackson.”

“When did you begin to have suicidal thoughts?”

“I don't know.”

“Are you in pain?” Don's hand twitches on the wooden arm of the chair as he talks.

Head hasn't stopped throbbing. Chest tight. Even with the medicine, he can feel it. He coughs all the time. Sometimes it makes him sick. Sometimes it doesn't.

Lane swallows. “It's fine.”

Don sits forward in his chair, balancing his forearms on his knees and meeting Lane's eyes with a serious, unblinking expression. The intensity on his face is odd. Lane doesn't want to look at it, so he stares at an oily spot just above the other man's eyebrow.

“Listen to me.” Don clears his throat. “I understand things seem bleak. But this moment you're experiencing—this is the hardest part. You can start over. You can put it behind you.”

Everyone talks to him, but no one likes his answers.

“If you think so.”
Yes.

Nineteen sixty eight.

...Johnson.

What does it matter.

**

“.....so that was on Thursday. I remember it was Thursday because I met with Maxine—she's next door—about our weekly bridge club. The girls play in the summer. We're...drawing up a...league. Peter, stop poking me; what is the matter?”

A long pause. Whispering.

“No. Not yet.”

Loud throat-clearing. More silence.

“Lane, shall I tell you how Tammy greeted me when I got home the next night? What time was that, Lovely? Around seven?”

“Dear, you know it's always eight, with the train.”

“Oh—yes, it must have been. I don't know how I could forget.”

“Don't be silly. I'm sure Lane doesn't mind one bit.” A pause. “Peter. Go on.”

“Well...on Friday, Tammy got into Trudy's makeup box—”

**

Joan's high heels click loudly on the tile floor of the hospital hallway. Around her, doctors and nurses and employees are in motion. They frown over patient charts and exam results, and push gurneys toward surgery with practiced efficiency. The rhythm of a hospital still feels both familiar and strange to her. When she and Greg were first dating, she'd go by St. Luke's after work, visit him in the evenings some weekdays. He liked that. In those first few weeks, she spent quite a bit of time with him in the cafeteria – or in the on-call room – in order to sneak a few minutes alone together. She even made friends with a few of the surgical nurses. It feels strange to be in another hospital.

A round, middle-aged woman with dark hair set into a stiff bob is the only person at the circular nurse's desk. Her uniform is crisp, as if she's just come on duty. Joan approaches her, catches her eye.

“I'm here to see Lane Pryce. Can you tell me his room number?”

The woman shuffles a stack of papers, glances over a long list on a clipboard, then waves a hand toward the hallway to Joan's left.

“449. Just through those double-doors.”

“Thank you.”
Joan strides briskly down the indicated hallway, pausing only to read the red-lettered white sign posted on the closed double doors. *No smoking. Oxygen in use.*

She switches her purse to her left arm, and pushes the metal door open with a black-gloved hand. There are two rooms directly past this set of doors, one to the left – 450 – and one to the right, 449. The wooden door to room forty nine is partially open, and after taking a deep breath, Joan walks inside, stopping just after the doorway.

It's like any other hospital room. A high steel bed, featuring two side railings and made up with coarse white linens, is pushed up against the right wall, which is painted a garish yellow. There is a telephone mounted on the wall next to the bed, and empty mounts placed several feet above where a headboard might normally be. Probably for monitors, or some kind of specialized equipment.

The bed closest to the hallway – the one Joan's been staring at for at least a minute – is empty, but the divider curtain between the beds is partially drawn. The blanket-covered form of a man's legs and feet are just visible in the second bed. At the foot of this bed are two wooden framed chairs with lumpy vinyl upholstery.

She walks closer, comes to stand just beside the green curtain. Lane's bedside table is empty except for a large plastic water pitcher, a small drinking cup, and a square ceramic dish, olive green with a large white scroll on one side. There are no flowers. Not even a card. The only personal object on that table is his black pair of glasses. Also broken, and taped together at the bridge. She looks away, and makes a mental note to place an order with the florist.

Lane is awake, sitting up slightly in bed. The white blankets are pulled up to his abdomen, his arms are crossed over them, and he's staring out the window with a resigned expression. Even from this angle, his eyes look bloodshot, like several of the vessels have burst. Fading purple bruises dot his face, and his cheeks and forehead have several stitched-up lacerations. Joan wonders if this is a result of being pulled from the car.

He's also got a clear tube in his nose. Probably leading to an oxygen tank. Color is high – face, neck, and arms are bright red, like he's feverish, or like he's been sprinting for hours in ten degree weather. His breathing has a wheezing quality, maybe because of the tube in his nose, or in spite of it. Barring the injuries, what's strange is seeing how vulnerable Lane looks in his hospital gown. No suit pieces to hide behind, no papers to busy his hands. His red-blond hair is oily, as well. Very disheveled. Stupidly, Joan wonders if he's had a chance to wash it since the attempt.

A lump forms in her throat, and she attempts to swallow it. She also forces herself to smile – it's tremulous, it slides from her face almost immediately – and raises a hand to get his attention.

“May I come in?”

Her eyes well as he turns to look at her and shrugs. Joan decides to take this reaction as a qualified yes, and takes a seat in the upholstered chair, dabbing quickly at her eyes and trying not to look at him as she does this, as if breaking eye contact will magically keep him from seeing that she's upset. She tosses her purse into the empty chair next to her, along with her gloves. Keep it together, for god's sake. You're not the one in the hospital.

After a moment, she forces herself to look at him. His eyes are fixed on her, but he isn't speaking. Maybe he doesn't know what to say. Not that she does, either. Joan expels a deep breath, and decides to start with the truth. “You tried to kill yourself.”

He blinks, as if he didn't quite expect her to say it out loud, but his flat, exhausted expression doesn't change, or register surprise.
“I don’t know why you did it,” Joan continues, twisting her hands in her lap, “or if the reason even matters now, but I think about it all the time. And I can’t stop.”

“You're crying.” Lane's voice is raspy, quiet, and strangely devoid of reassurance. Like he's just noticed. Like he's discussing the weather.

“Oh of course I am. It—seeing you here upsets me.” She swipes at her damp eyes, bites her lip to keep from being overly sharp with him. “I—” she stops herself from saying I wish, mentally hearing her mother's voice taunting her. If wishes were fishes, we'd be mermaids, for God's sake.

She steels herself to admit a difficult truth. “You were unhappy. And I was too busy being ugly to you to notice.”

Joan's not dense enough to think she caused his melancholy by herself, but she does know that consciously antagonizing him was unnecessary, and that her behavior added to his existing stress. She was childish. She was petty. “I—wanted to tell you—I'm sorry I did that. I...was wrong.”

Admitting this is a bitter pill. It feels like asking forgiveness, which she hates doing, and which he's not in the position to accept or deny. But it has to be said. It's important for him to hear that she regrets her bad behavior, even if he's not in the right frame of mind to accept an apology. She just has to tell him. He's her friend, for God's sake. He needs to know.

He's still looking at her. Suddenly, Joan feels uncomfortable, glances down at her hands.

This is not about you. Stop talking. Right now. What is wrong with you?

“I'm sorry,” she says again, somewhat at a loss. What she's apologizing for this time is unclear.

There is a very long silence. It stretches out into several minutes, so heavy and oppressive that it causes her to check her watch twice, to dig her fingernails into her palms and stare out the window like an uncomfortable child. Joan debates whether she should stay, whether she should ask Lane what he would like for her to do, or whether it would be equally helpful to bring in the paper and sit in silence. At least then she'd have something to do with her hands.

Before she can formulate a plan of action, Lane clears his throat. She glances over to see his cheeks are shining with tears. He's staring out the window. He doesn't seem to have noticed he's crying.

When he speaks, it's so quiet it's as if he expects to be talking to himself.

“She left me.”

Joan closes her eyes, feeling them well again. So it is true. When she re-opens them, she reaches for her purse, clicks the latch open, and pulls out her primly folded handkerchief. Its scalloped edges are done in light blue thread, with a little cluster of purple and red flowers in the bottom right corner. With one fluid motion, she stands up, crosses closer to the bed, and presses the cotton into the top of his folded hands.

He turns to look at her, brow slightly furrowed, as if he doesn't quite understand why she'd do this. She doesn't speak, just wipes a few stray tears from her own eyes, and waves her free hand in an indication for him to take the handkerchief. After a moment, he puts a hesitant palm to his own face. When his fingers come away damp, he seems to understand.

Joan puts a hand to his free arm, and purses her mouth to keep from losing it completely, giving him a jerky nod in an attempt to show she heard what he said. After a moment, she draws back, and returns to her seat, glancing out the window as she sits down.
The sun is setting. She'll have to go home soon.

Chapter End Notes

I have never tried to commit suicide or get carbon monoxide poisoning, so this chapter (and the successive ones) required quite a bit of research. Given my internet search history at one point, I'm sure the NSA still believes I've got a lot of personal problems. But to give you an idea of what inspired this particular take on both of those topics, starting points ranged from Rob Delaney to Hyperbole and a Half. For the carbon monoxide symptoms/after effects, I read a lot of medical journals and websites as well as a forum meant for survivor support.

Also, I thought it was important to acknowledge that Joan is experiencing a lot of guilt about the way she treated Lane in the weeks before his suicide attempt, in addition to guilt for not seeing the reality of his situation. Which she can't help but try to express. Even in the context of the show, we saw it eat her alive after the suicide occurred. While Lane, on the other hand, feels shame. To quote Brene Brown: "guilt says; “you’ve done something bad” or “you’ve made a bad choice.” Shame says: “you are bad.”" So it'll be interesting to see that dynamic play out in later chapters.
Joan peels back a corner of the foil-covered dish, and is immediately assaulted by the rank smells of spoiled milk and congealed grease. She winces, quickly re-covering the casserole, but not before she spies a large patch of dark green in the corner, peering through layers of cheese. It could be broccoli. It could also be mold. How the hell could anyone be expected to eat this?

“Who brought this?”

Lane's watching her movements, albeit with a flat, exhausted expression. After a moment, he clears his throat. “...Campbells. The—loud one.”

“Trudy,” Joan says automatically, staring briefly down at her distorted reflection in the foil. “Jesus. No wonder Pete's gotten fat.”

She's too exhausted to be anything but candid with him. Since he appreciates honesty at the best of times, Joan likes to think her lack of censure is better received than any vapid small talk she can muster, or answers she might demand. He just needs someone to keep him company, remind him that he isn't alone.

It's her fourth visit to the hospital in as many days, and today, she's attempting to be helpful instead of sitting in that chair like a lump on a log. So far, she's changed the water in his flowers, brought him his spare pair of frames (now fixed with superglue), and displayed his two get-well cards on the now-clean bedside table. One from the office – she had everyone sign it – and one from the 4As.

Joan picks up the casserole dish. “Do you know what day she brought this?”

Lane shrugs. She sighs. “Well, it's toxic. I'm throwing it out.”

She goes to toss the contents in the trash can by the second, still empty bed behind the curtain, tying off the garbage bag immediately to prevent its odor from permeating the room, and moving into the small adjoining bathroom to wash out what little residue is left.

His long-term memory is stable; Joan's gleaned this much. And he seems to remember broad stroke details. He can also answer most of the doctors' rote questions – or avoid answering them – but has trouble with finer points of memory: names, years, assorted specifics. It may improve with time. Or not. No one seems to know for sure.

Joan scrubs at the concave surface of the dish with a coarse hospital washcloth, using squirt after squirt of filmy green hand soap until the ceramic surface gleams under her hands. When she returns to the room, meaning to ask him a question about his medication, Lane is hunched over in bed, holding an open paper bag over his mouth with both hands. He's either hyperventilating or he's gotten sick. Judging by his greenish pallor and residual coughing, it's the latter.

Hovering over his bed, near his knees, is a lunch tray on a rolling metal table. The contents seem untouched except for a sandwich marred by a single bite, and pushed away in haste. Some unknown pink lunchmeat is sliding slowly out from between the bread.

“Are you all right?”

Lane shakes his head minutely, eyes still closed. After a moment, he blinks his eyes open, pulls the
paper bag away from his mouth, and sinks back into the pillows. He looks exhausted. She picks up the trash can by the bed, proffers it in his direction so he can throw away the unclean paper bag. One of the nurses mentioned aversions as a possible side effect, new reactions to certain tastes or scents.

"Was it the meat?"

He makes a noise of disagreement, eyes still closed, and jabs a finger toward the floor.

She glances down. On the floor next to the dresser is an oozing mayonnaise packet, torn open at the corner. Picking this up with her finger and thumb, and throwing it into the garbage, Joan makes a mental note of this. No mayonnaise. She'll speak with the head nurse about having it omitted from future meals.

When she sets down the trash can and walks into the hallway, however, an unattended cart sits in the center of the corridor, filled with plastic trays. A female attendant talks cheerfully to a patient in the room across the hall – Joan can hear them laughing – and on an impulse, before the woman can return, Joan strides forward, swipes two paper cups of something from the top trays, and darts back into Lane's room, closing the door behind her.

On closer inspection, both of them turn out to be Jell-O. Red and green.

Lane doesn't look like he cares where she went, but she still feels like she should explain. She pushes the untouched tray aside, and sets her new bounty near the edge of the table. “I stole these from the lunch cart. You should try to eat.”

“All tastes awful,” he mumbles, after a long silence.

Joan tries not to dwell on how depressing that is. He can't even enjoy something as simple as a meal. Not that they make real food here. Maybe she should bring him lunch, next time. She pulls a pocket-size leather notebook from her purse—a new purchase as of two visits ago—and writes a single note in shorthand under today's date.

**

A knock on her door. Joan sets her papers aside, glances at her desk clock. 3PM. “Yes?”

Ken Cosgrove peers around the now-open door. “Hey. You got a minute?”

She lights a cigarette. “Have a seat.”

He closes the door behind him. She raises her eyebrows. So it’s that kind of discussion.

“Look,” he says first, fidgeting in his chair. “I understand you've got a lot on your plate right now, but I—have a favor to ask you. It's important.”

Joan blinks, waiting for clarification. Must be a personal problem.

“I need you to be in on Friday's meeting. With Bird's Eye.”

She takes a long drag of her cigarette. Not what she expected.

He rubs a hand along the back of his neck. “I don't know if it's—creative—”

(Don, she thinks acidly, has breathed nothing but Jaguar for months)

“—or maybe it's something I did—but they won't commit to new work, and they're barely returning
my phone calls. I mean, I know what that means, but—"

Five million in billings. Not essential in the grand scheme of things, but until this point, still an easy company to manage. She puts her cigarette in her ashtray. “Why do you need me?”

She doesn't want to feign interest in the lives of executives and sit in on what's basically a single-account traffic meeting while she could be doing a million other useful things.

Ken shifts in his chair, edging forward. “It's hard for me to get a read on them. And you're good at that. Hell, you're the best.”

Acerbic words are already flying to her lips – that's it?-- but he seems to have already realized one compliment isn't a selling point, because he continues speaking, in a rush.

“They've been asking a lot of budget questions, too. I think it'd be helpful for them to meet you.” Gesturing in her direction with an open palm, inclining his head as if in a bow. “You can talk to them about their money, draw them out, put 'em at ease.”

When she’d first begun to assist Lane with the books, years ago, he'd once gone on a long tangent about his personal job philosophy. It had probably started life as an explanation for the task at hand, which was introducing her to the fiscal year budget. A financier is the curator of a company's bounty. We are meant to improve upon the capital given to us by accounts—to preserve and increase our collection's net worth over the coming years.

You make us sound like Egyptologists, she'd replied, with an upward quirk of her mouth that was almost a smile. Trying to get him to warm up to her, for god's sake. But he obviously hadn't expected her to make light of his speech—and hadn't liked it. She remembers the way his eyes had narrowed behind his glasses. But he hadn't said a word, had just changed the subject and walked her through the spreadsheets with a brisk attitude that bordered on impatience.

Joan blinks, returning to herself, and stubs out her cigarette with a sudden angry sharpness. Determination surges inside her chest. Lane's philosophy isn't law; skilled financiers don't have to be invisible. Hiding in the shadows drove him to a suicide attempt, for god's sake.

She fixes her stare on Ken, who is obviously waiting for her to speak, and clears her throat. “What time is the meeting?”

**

Half an hour in, and it isn't going well. Jerry and Mitch – Bird's Eye founders, two brothers who look about as similar as Abbott and Costello – are pleasant enough. More than willing to make small talk about the city. But they are jittery. They don't want to change creative, and they shy away from speaking about their current fiscal year, or their expenses at the agency. Ken even tried to initiate a discussion about last year's budget, but getting them to answer questions has been like pulling teeth.

They're having money problems. Joan can't believe she's about to have this conversation again, especially with a client, but there's no point in tiptoeing around. If they're bankrupt, or going bankrupt, or even just in the red, they'll have to talk about it eventually. Why not now?

She scribbles a note to Scarlett in shorthand: leave the room for 20 minutes; complete typing in my outbox while you're gone. When she hands this to the young secretary, paper-clipped to several spreadsheets they won't need again, the girl startles with visible surprise as she reads it, but obeys without protest.

“I'll—um—make some copies of these for our guests,” she says awkwardly, picking up the stack of
spreadsheets and swiftly leaving the room. Once the door swings shut behind her, Joan deems it safe to speak again, and directs her question to Jerry.

“How long have you been in the red?”

She feels the toe of Ken's shoe nudge her sharply in the ankle, but she kicks him right back, probably harder than necessary.

Mitch jumps to his feet, face reddening in blotches as he stares at Joan with poorly disguised anger. His jacket cinches tightly around his expansive middle as he points a finger at her. “Who the hell do you think—listen, I don't need some stranger—”

“Jesus,” Jerry blurts, half-standing, obviously panicking. “You can't just yell at her—”

“For god's sake, Jerry, this is what I told you in the goddamn elevator—”

Ken is on his feet, his hands extended in a gesture of supplication as he tries to calm Mitch's tantrum. Joan stays seated, locking eyes with Jerry as she waits for the initial storm to blow over.

He's staring back at her with a haggard, worn look that suggests her first comment stuck a bull's eye. And after another moment, he sinks back into his seat, as if his legs will hardly hold him. The chair rolls away from the table as he sits, his hands clenched in fists. Although he speaks in a voice just above a whisper, he's already drawn the room's attention.

“God. I don't—understand how you knew.”

“Listen to me.” Joan feels it's safe for her to speak, looking calmly between the two men and Ken, holding up a hand. If she can hook Jerry, and keep the room calm, Mitch will gradually become receptive to what she has to say. “Ken and I are not here to make judgments, or to put you through the wringer. But we, as an agency, can't be useful unless you trust us with the truth.”

She pauses, closes her job folder.

“We've represented several companies who have gone through dire straits. And, since you've already paid for this meeting, I propose we use the rest of our time to everyone's advantage. Tell us what services are essential to you, what financial changes your situation might warrant, and we can start formulating a new business plan with those figures in mind.”

Joan glances to Ken, indicating that he can jump in when ready. He glances to Mitch, who's still poised in a standing position.

“Come on. It can't hurt,” Ken says, gesturing for him to sit. “We're just talking. All right?”

Mitch mumbles a streak of curses Joan can't hear, but he blows out a breath and takes his seat next to Jerry, who looks visibly relieved, and cuffs him briefly on the shoulder.

Joan exhales a quiet breath through her nose, feeling the chaos of the room start to come under finer control. “I assume you haven't broken the news to your staff.”

Mitch is silent, arms crossed, looking pointedly at the conference table. Jerry rubs a nervous hand over the back of his neck, speaking in a rasp. “We couldn't figure out how to tell 'em. I mean, we'll have to—but it kills me to think about it, you know? God. I don't even know how this happened.”

“I understand.” Joan says. She glances at Mitch to see if he's ready to participate. He looks up suddenly, and meets her unspoken question with a glare. “How the hell do we admit to our boys that
we're losing money? Got any thoughts on that?"

Ken makes a warning noise in the back of his throat, but Joan does not break Mitch's gaze.

“Typically, it begins with downsizing.”

Mitch shakes his head, with a loud scoff. The men look nervously at each other, but Jerry speaks first. “Look. We start making layoffs, people start talking.”

“Let them. It's better than doing nothing.” She pauses, deciding empathy is the best tactic in this situation. “Two years ago, our largest account walked out of here with very little warning.”

“I remember,” Mitch says gruffly, with a nod to Ken. “I said we ought to dump you, but, uh, Kenny here persuaded us to wait it out.”

Joan inclines her head in a nod, indicating that she's grateful. “What Ken may not have mentioned was that at the time, that account took up sixty percent of our operating budget.”

Jerry gives a low whistle, while Mitch swears loudly. After a furtive look at Joan, the latter man clears his throat, reddening around the collar. “Sorry.”

“We know exactly what it's like to struggle,” Joan says in response. “And it's very painful. But when it happened to us, we executed necessary measures in order to keep this company in the black.”

She pauses, lets that sink in before continuing. “Given your situation, you'll probably have to do the same. Trim the fat from all sectors: personnel, expenses, production, distribution. This isn't the time for caution. You are decisive men, and you have difficult decisions ahead.”

Mitch winces and slumps in his seat, like the words are a death blow, but he doesn't protest.

“You're right. God. You're right,” Jerry says quietly, multiple times, almost as if he's trying to reassure himself out loud.

Joan doesn’t speak for a moment, gauging their reactions to this pronouncement.

“Look. Your best clients, the ones who really matter, will see you through the hard times,” Ken adds, glancing quickly at Joan with wide eyes, as if this is the point she should be making. She keeps her expression carefully receptive, trying not to show how annoyed she is by his tangent.

“Bird's Eye stuck with us two years ago,” Ken's saying now, getting sentimental of all things, “and because of your faith—your loyalty—look at where we are now. We're reaping new success.” He lets out a small, short breath which is probably meant to be a laugh. “Plus, I haven't smoked a Lucky in years.”

Joan gives the joke a perfunctory smile, but there is an awkward silence, broken only when Mitch pulls out his handkerchief from his jacket pocket, mops his forehead and neck, and puts it away again. When he speaks again, in a low grumble, he can't quite meet Joan's eyes. “Think you said you had some, ah—numbers for this. Like an outline.”

She reaches for her notepad, writing a quick, neat heading at the top of the margin. “I do.” After a pause. “Though I'll need you to confirm your current budget.”

**

Handshakes are exchanged, Ken's walking them out to the elevator, and it's over—thank god, it's
over for now. They're putting all creative on hold indefinitely, but they're still a paying account, and that's what matters.

Jesus, her head is pounding. Joan pinches the bridge of her nose. She needs a drink, but shouldn't have one until the portfolio work is done. Which will be hours from now.

The glass door squeaks slightly on its hinges as it's pushed open. Joan looks up to see Ken standing a few feet away from her. He waits until the door falls closed before he speaks, phrasing his next words as a statement rather than a question. “Why aren't you at all accounts meetings.”

Joan gives a shrug, exhausted. “Why would I be? It's not my department.”

He huffs out a frustrated noise, running a hand through his hair. “You accused a client of being bankrupt, talked them down from firing us, and then laid out their next two steps. They walked out of here as relaxed as I've seen them in weeks. Tell me you get how impressive that is.”

She shrugs. It's a Pyrrhic victory. “Well, you wanted diplomacy.”

“Come on,” Ken replies, voice quiet. “Joan, you had them in the palm of your hand. And I think we make a good team. We could tailor this strategy to other accounts.”

Her voice is flat. “You mean the ones that aren't bleeding money?”

“Don't do that. I'm not kidding around.” Ken exhales a deep breath. “You don't need me to tell you how good you are, but this is your chance to prove it. Not just as a financial director. You could strengthen your position in the entire agency. Isn't that what you want?”

She bristles visibly at the words. “I don't have to prove anything in order to deliver excellent work.”

Ken puts up his hands in surrender. “All I'm saying is that going to meetings like this one—being visible to people, and knowledgeable—it's an opportunity to expand your professional influence.” A pause. “Which, honestly, I kind of thought you'd appreciate.”

“Jesus,” she huffs, frustrated by the earnestness of his hard sell. Why does he suddenly care about her career trajectory? Does he feel guilty because of the way she became partner? Is he doing this because he wants to be a partner?

“Just--consider it. All right?”

Joan sighs. She just wants ten minutes alone, for god's sake. “Fine.”

“Okay.” He's almost cheerful. The glass door closes in his wake as he ambles out into the hall. Joan glances out at him through the windows, wishes the curtains were closed so she could put her head down and close her eyes without anyone noticing.

She's already made one phone call home to tell her mother she'll be late, and that was after four o'clock. Joan sets aside her paperwork and checks her watch. 7PM. She presses her fingers to her throbbing temples. Aspirin hasn't been able to touch it. It's probably from the eye strain. She really should have brought her glasses; she'll have to start wearing them more often.

“Joan?”

She opens her eyes and lowers her hands to see Michael Ginsberg peering into her doorway. He
hovers about a foot from the door, not coming in, but his worried expression is still visible despite the residual blurriness in her vision.

Joan's been taking extra time each night to look over sections of the company portfolio, re-visiting holdings and savings and dividends, making sure she knows every portion of it, in case someone asks. She doesn't have to explain herself to creative, though, and so she just stares back at Ginsberg, eyes narrowed. “What?”

“No—I was just gonna ask—you want a soda or something? Or a beer? Or—”

Her voice is icy. “I don't drink beer.”

She heaves out a sigh, gets up from her chair and leaves her office through the back door in order to visit the restroom and splash some cold water on her face. When she returns, she finds Ginsberg now inside her office, kneeling on the ground next to her desk and surrounded by an avalanche of paper. A full, bright-green bottle of Mountain Dew sits on the tabletop next to her ashtray.

He's gathering up a haphazard armful of paper. “Sorry—I was—I brought you that, and then it almost fell, and I went to catch it and then a bunch of papers went over the side.” Placing stacks back onto her desk in messy, toppling piles that refuse to stay put. “Shit! Jesus, I swear I'm not a snoop. I'll get out of your hair.”

The only thing he's been able to wrangle back onto her desk is a large white envelope. Watching him try to pick up the mess makes her imagine what he must have been like as a little boy. For a split second, she thinks of Kevin, at home with her mother, wriggling through the living room and grabbing everything he can get his chubby fists on. They had to take the tablecloth off the end table last month because he kept tugging it down.

She swallows the tirade that hovers on the edge of her tongue, shooing Ginsberg out of the way. “Just—stop flailing around, for god's sake. I'll get it. Move.”

In response, he staggers to his feet, and practically runs out of the room. Joan rolls her eyes, stepping over the mess and eyeing the white folder now on the seat of her chair. Part of the last stack of papers she's examining; it's been at the bottom of the pile. She opens it, and grabs the first deposit slip her fingers touch, scanning it with a critical eye to confirm it's able to be thrown out before her mind registers the last four digits of the account number: four seven two eight.

That's not right.

The last four digits of the company account are zero six nine seven. Joan's had that memorized ever since she started helping Lane with the books. She flips quickly through the other pages. There are a few more loose deposit slips in the envelope, along with quarterly summaries spanning the last two years, portfolio statements, and some type of fiscal projection, dated March 1965.

Jesus. It's an investment account. Established June of that same year, by Lane, and with a starting sum of fifty thousand dollars. Joan recognizes the firm name, but not the broker's. Anthony M. Blake, M.B.A., M.D.

She starts collating and organizing these papers into a file folder as fast as she can, making sure to include all relevant documents. Unbelievable. Unbelievable.

**

“He didn't put the lump sum into savings. He invested it.”
10AM. They're in Lane's office. Mr. Cooper is on the sofa, glancing over the documents in question, which are laid out across the coffee table in neat stacks, next to the ledger. Joan sits across from him, in the rolling chair swiped from behind the desk. She's written the bullet points on her open stenography pad, but doesn't even have to consult it while speaking.

“Four hundred thousand dollars was collected from the partners in May of '65. Three hundred and fifty thousand was distributed among the company over the next year as recorded in the books—dispersed to the bank as collateral, or paid out to clients, vendors, and employees. But the remaining fifty thousand was invested into a separate portfolio. Mostly growth funds.”

The stock summary reads like a spec sheet of profitable, high-risk companies: IBM, Dow, ConocoPhillips. For whatever skill Lane lacks in reading a room, at reading people, his ability to spot financial trends in a volatile market is...impressive. Joan's wavered between feeling offended that he kept this a secret and admiring the sheer nerve of this decision. This was a bold move for someone who's convinced he can't do anything right. But Lane must have felt extremely confident in order to do this. He must have been certain that it would work. How could that be the same person who's in the hospital after a failed suicide attempt?

Cooper, meanwhile, is examining the papers with calm detachment. “Lane believed we could increase our overall return through speculation, as opposed to earning interest on a transactional account.” He glances at Joan, one corner of his mouth lifting in amusement. “The other partners disagreed.”

She doesn't doubt it. Don would have been anxious to put that much cash out of reach. And Pete probably said no out of spite. Maybe Roger, too, if Lane caught him in a bad mood.

She presses the older man about his imprecision. “Did you ask him to invest it?”

“Mrs. Harris.” The bemused look Mr. Cooper gives her is so close to patronizing it makes Joan want to throw one of those folders at him. “Current situation notwithstanding, I don't spend my days course-correcting the work of senior partners.”

Bullshit, she thinks, cutting him a glare. Cooper lives to know everything that's going on in this agency. Maybe he suggested the investment to Lane, or maybe he didn't, but he clearly suspected something. It's written all over his face. He's so self-satisfied there might as well be canary feathers sticking out of his mouth.

“Well,” she begins, voice crisp, “you may be interested to know that I spoke with the broker this morning—Tony Blake.” She tilts her head slightly, holds Cooper's steady gaze. “Since this account's inception, they've more than doubled Lane's original investment.”

He lets out a chuckle. “Meaning you'd like to put the surplus to better use.”

Joan closes her steno pad with one hand, so quickly it makes a snapping sound, mimicking his carefree tone. “Don't you miss having a door with your name on it?”

Cooper's eyes widen almost imperceptibly. Joan's mouth twitches, but she stops herself from looking too pleased. “The office space above us is empty, and available for lease.”

**

10PM.

“Joanie?” Her mother's voice is shrill as she calls through the bedroom door. The doorknob rattles in its frame, but stays locked. “Oh, for god's sake. What's the matter with you?”
Joan's lying on top of her bed in her work clothes, has been staring at the ceiling of her bedroom ever since she got back from the hospital. Her red acetate dress is wrinkled across her stomach from staying seated all day: first at the office and then in that stupid wooden chair. She can feel the elastic of her garters and foundation garments digging into her skin, leaving deep red welts, but doesn't want to move. She just wants to be alone for ten minutes, she wants to think about absolutely nothing.

Lane must have had another oxygen treatment before she arrived, or taken medicine, or something, because he said more to her tonight than he has in two weeks. Most of it upsetting. She's trying not to dwell on it. Next to her bed, Kevin sleeps peacefully in his crib, breathing tiny snuffling snores. She turns on her side to look at him.

“Joanie. Are you drunk?”

A particle of dust flutters through Joan's field of vision, and she blinks. Feels the threat of tears prick the corners of her eyes. God. She is so sick of crying. She is so exhausted she can't think straight.

“No.”

“Fine,” her mother sniffs, from the other side of the door. “Keep brooding. It ages you.”

She closes her eyes.
April 1967

Joan moves the teabag around her chipped white teacup in a back and forth motion. Little swirls of gold begin to tint the boiling water, and she drags the string from side to side within the mug, keeps watching the eddys spread through the cup until the liquid is a dark amber color.

It's lunchtime. She's still trying to adjust to the new schedule, although it's been several weeks since Lane was released from the hospital. It feels odd to have more time to herself. Almost wrong, although Joan would be lying if she said it wasn't helpful to have a few moments alone with her own thoughts. That's why they agreed on this routine, after all.

A sudden movement causes Joan to glance up as Myra slides into the adjoining booth. The other woman's not wearing her nurse's uniform today, but a bright blue paisley dress with short sleeves and a peter pan collar. It sets off her olive skin beautifully.

“I'm sorry,” she says to Joan, setting her attache aside, “I thought we said quarter to one?”

Joan shakes her head. “We did. I'm early.”

“Oh,” Myra says, but doesn't comment further, just produces a notebook from her leather satchel. “Well, did you want to eat first? We can go over the update later.” A pause, in which she slants Joan a suspicious look. “You are eating, right?”

“Yes,” Joan says with a sigh, pushing her teacup aside. Myra's too nosy for her own good. She's planning to order a salad, for god's sake. It's fine. “Business first.”

**

The hospital courtyard is so small it's almost claustrophobic. Six steps forward, to the walnut tree in the center of the square, six steps back toward the double doors. Just as Joan is walking toward the building, a nurse with dark wavy hair and wearing a crisp white uniform pushes open the door. She has a small canvas bag slung over one shoulder, and startles when she sees Joan, hazel eyes flicking over Joan's fraught expression. “I'm sorry. Did you need to get by?”

“No,” Joan snaps, turning away, lighting another cigarette off the last and crushing the butt under the toe of her high heel as she starts pacing again. Her shoe wobbles under her as she turns. Jesus. At this rate, she's going to have to stop by the machine before she goes back to the office. It's the second pack of cigarettes she's gone through in two weeks.

Lane will need someone to make sure he takes his medication. Eats regular meals. Gets out of the house—god, she doesn't know how she'll make the time to do this. She's already getting up at four o'clock, and that's including the time built in to get to work, make a list for the girls—someone's just going to have to take the time cards off her hands, she hasn't checked them in earnest for far too long—oh, damn it, the contractors—Cooper wanted to meet tomorrow to discuss the blueprints—

Someone's got her by the hand. They're moving toward the square white table in the far corner,
surrounded by four wooden chairs, but Joan can hardly walk. Why can't she—?

“You're shaking,” a woman’s voice says, firm. The nurse from before. “You need to sit down.”

“No, I’m—” Joan protests, but as soon as she sinks into a sitting position, she realizes her hands are trembling so violently she can barely hold her cigarette. She’s shivering all over, and her head is spinning. She feels like she’s going to throw up, and leans forward in her chair, resting her forearms on her knees, just in case.

The nurse plucks the cigarette from Joan’s fingers, puts it out of view, and encircles Joan’s wrist with her slender fingers. Checking her pulse. “When’s the last time you ate?”

“I—” Joan begins, then realizes she doesn’t know. There was a tray of food in the conference room. Yesterday. Did she have any? She’s sweating, she can feel it beading on her face. “Um—”

“Do you feel dizzy?”

Joan nods once, closing her eyes to stop the vertigo. They can't focus. Why can't she see?

“And how’s your vision? Are you blurry?”

“What's happening?” Joan blurs, her voice cracking over the last word.

“Hey. You’re going to be fine,” the nurse replies in a soothing voice. “Your blood sugar is very low. That's all.” She presses something into Joan’s hand. A cold soda can, judging by the feel. Joan opens her eyes to see a white straw sticking out of the top. “Sip this if you can. It's apple juice.”

After several minutes, Joan feels like she can move without getting sick. She lets out a deep breath, sits up, and sinks back into her chair, placing the can of juice on the table with a shaky hand.

The nurse watches Joan's movements carefully. “Well, you've got a little color. That's an improvement.” She produces her canvas bag, and pulls two square tupperware containers from it. Orange and green. “Pick one. You need to eat something.”

“I can't,” Joan mumbles. After a pause. “Not hungry.”

“You'll eat,” the nurse says crisply, pushing the green plastic dish in Joan's direction. “Unless, in another hour, you want to pass out in front of all your coworkers.”

Joan's eyes widen.

“Try the cookies,” the woman says into the silence. “Chocolate chip.”

**

“Well, his red blood cell count has improved,” Myra says, flipping over a page of her yellow legal pad, “meaning his brain gets more oxygen. Because of the cognitive behavioral treatments he's doing with the psychiatrist, his recall is better, too. We've also been doing a few exercises on our own.”

Joan raises her eyebrows. “A few?”

The other woman gives a short laugh. “He tries to avoid all of them.” Noticing Joan's unhappy expression. “But we get everything done. Five times a week.”

“Good.”
Myra nods. “Yeah. It is.” She flips another page on her legal pad. “Oh, this is from the beginning of last week. He doesn’t move around on his own as much as he should.”

“I keep telling him—” Joan begins helplessly, then stops. “I don’t know what else to do.”

“Not your fault,” Myra replies, completely calm. She takes a sip of her cola. “We can tweak the routine if we need to.”

**

“Tell me about your person,” the nurse says. “How long have they been here?”

Joan gives her a glare that says you must be joking. She’s been forced to eat two cookies, and it’s been at least ten minutes since the episode. They do not need to strike up conversation.

“Nurse-patient confidentiality,” the other woman says, voice sly, as if they’re sharing a joke. “Plus, if you answer, I’ll give you my potato chips. You need to eat more.”

“Will I faint if I don’t?” Joan asks, a little of her usual sharpness returning to her voice. The other woman raises an eyebrow, immediately matching her tone.

“You want to take that chance?”

Wordlessly, Joan holds out her hand for the bag. There’s silence for a moment. Joan takes a chip, chews it briefly, then swallows her bite, mulling over what she can say without giving away too much. “It’s—my friend. We work together.”

“What’s wrong with him?” A pause. “Or her?”

“Him,” Joan corrects. She struggles for a way to put this delicately, as it’s not her secret to tell. “He’s—depressed.”

The woman’s face remains placid, but there’s a glint of understanding in her eyes. “Suicidal?”

Joan blinks, relieved to hear brutal honesty. “Yes.” Just saying the word makes her blink again, rapidly, trying not to cry. “It’s awful.”

Fine. She meant to say fine.

“Eat another chip,” the nurse says, not unkindly. Joan does, not even tasting it.

“You don’t want to hear about this.”

“I’m not in a hurry, so you might as well talk about it,” the woman answers, with a shrug. With two fingers, she pushes the bag of potato chips closer to Joan. Small gold hoops in her ears glitter with the movement of her arm. “Does he have family here?”

Joan shakes her head no, pursing her mouth. He deserves better than to be alone. After a moment, she exhales a breath, composure still intact. When she speaks, her voice is low.

“I need to go. I’m very busy.”

It’s not as if she’s asking permission. Joan does not ask for permission to do anything. But in the back of her mind, she pictures herself fainting in the middle of the creative lounge, drawing unwanted attention and proving to the other partners that she’s doing too much, that she’s completely useless. She just needs confirmation that she won’t make a fool of herself if she leaves now. That’s all.
The nurse sighs, motioning for Joan to hold out her arm. “Let me check your pulse again. If it's normal, then you can leave.” After another moment. “Get a sandwich on your way out. Nurse's orders.”

Joan nods, so relieved at the woman's cooperation that she doesn't bother to argue. “Okay.”

**

Myra checks her watch. “Ten after. He should be here within the next few minutes.”

“I thought you said the psychiatrist's office was two blocks that way,” Joan says, glancing out at the busy street with mild concern. Next to their window, two pigeons are fighting over a piece of newspaper. All bypassers are giving the fluttering birds a wide berth, except for a child who tries to toddle into the melee and scares them into flying away. “Their session ended at one.”

“He's still cautious,” the nurse says, with a shrug, and pops a french fry into her mouth. “Especially with that cane. Baby steps.”

Joan sets her jaw, determined not to comment. Myra's heard it all before. If Lane's not pushed hard enough, he won't be able to stick to the schedule. It was difficult enough to convince Cooper for the necessity of a gradual return. This is the same man who compelled Roger back to work and into a second coronary within a month. By comparison, nine weeks of medical leave border on laziness. Lane can't take more than that without seeming weak.

She has fought for him in partners' meetings, and mentioned his name in passing during meetings of her own, to make the upcoming return feel as seamless as possible to all outsiders. But the date looms at the front of Joan's mind. She doesn't know how well this is going to work, or if it will work at all. His recovery has been good but not excellent—not perfect. And the transition has to go perfectly. She does not want to think about going to the office without him on a permanent basis.

Not after how hard they've worked.

“If you want to smoke,” Myra says, interrupting Joan's train of thought, “you should do it now, before he gets here.”

**

“Did your psychiatrist stop by today?”

Lane shrugs, pulling his hospital blankets up around his hips. The gesture sends Joan's blood pressure through the roof, even before he answers. “Dunno.”

“You—well, did he leave any paperwork? There should be a medical release form—”

“I don't know! ” Lane retorts loudly. Joan gives a growl of frustration, tossing away the pen she's using to take notes and holding out the small stenography pad toward the foot of the bed, arm completely extended, as if he could just reach out and take it from her. She wants to throw it at his head. She's trying not to lose her temper, but her voice is too forceful by half.

“Lane, I can't be here all the time. Will you start writing things down, for god's sake?”

“Stop yelling at me, you're always yelling—”

There's a flash of movement in the doorway, and high heels on the tile. At the noise, Lane stops talking immediately, Joan glances over to see someone familiar standing a few feet away. The nurse
from the other afternoon.

“Mind if I interrupt? I need to check his vitals.”

“Go ahead,” Joan huffs, letting out a sigh. The less she has to talk right now, the better.

The nurse walks around the curtain so Lane can see her. “Hi, Lane. I'm Myra.”

Lane grunts out a word that might be hello, barely glancing up at the woman. To an outsider, this would seem rude, but it's more cordial than he's been to Joan over the past few days. Maybe, Joan thinks suddenly, she's been on this rotation before.

“Think you know the drill by now,” Myra says briskly, examining Lane's chart as if his reticence is completely normal, “but I'll remind you anyway. I'll check your heart rate, breath sounds, eye movements, and motor functions.”

With a quick glance back at Joan. “Do you want your friend to step out?”

After a moment, Lane nods. Joan's eyes widen. For god's sake, she's seen him asleep, in acute pain, hooked to all kinds of machines, and all of a sudden he's shy?! It’s just some stupid movement tests, nothing indecent. Jesus.

Myra is all business, giving Joan a firm look. “I’ll draw the curtain,” she says, inclining her head toward the far bed, to the empty chair beside it. “We should be about fifteen minutes.”

Joan gets up, walks purposefully to the other side of the partition and takes a seat in the indicated chair, crossing her arms over her chest with a huff. After a moment, she realizes she can't take notes on Lane's exam as she'd planned, because she left her stenography pad behind. Damn it.

There's a rustling noise, accompanied by a kind of grunt. Joan glances to her left, trying to glimpse what's happening through the curtain. It looks as if Lane's sitting up in bed. Myra's the only person speaking. “Okay, Lane, deep breath in.”

An inhalation that's promising, but not great. Still very shallow.

“And out.”

The exhale lasts for about a second before it dissolves into a deep cough.

“Not bad. You were worse last time.” The sound of water being poured into a plastic cup. “Here. Can you hold it, or do you need me to?”

Joan winces at the question, frustrated that it could even be asked with a straight face, desperately hoping the answer is yes. Lane's such a prideful man. He's embarrassed to struggle publicly at anything, let alone something as simple as holding a cup of water.

Maybe – the thought pops into her head, unbidden – that's why he didn't want you to stay.

Suddenly, she feels dizzy, a jolt of understanding rushing through her body.

She can't be his nurse.

“Hey,” Myra's voice again, “look what I found on the floor. All your paperwork.” Two steps toward the end of the bed, and more rustling. “Three more days, and you can be at home in your own bed. Know your friend'll be happy to hear that.”
Oh, god. Who's going to look out for him if she can't do it? He doesn't have anyone else. She doesn't want him to be alone, if he's alone he's just going to end up here all over again—

“She hates me,” Lane mumbles, and the admission makes Joan startle. Why the hell does he think that?

Judging by her tone, Myra seems unfazed. She snorts out an amused noise, as if he's just made some kind of joke. “She's been here every day. Someone who hates you wouldn't bother visiting.” A pause. “Try to put it another way. Different words.”

The resulting pause drives Joan up the wall. She has to clench her fists to stop herself from getting up and pacing, the dizzy feeling still making her temples ache.

“Angry,” Lane says suddenly, after several seconds of silence. “Joan's...angry...at me.”

She's—no, she's not angry —she's just trying to make sure he can go home, for god's sake, she's trying to help him! After everything that's happened, how does he not know that?

Joan clenches her jaw to keep herself quiet. Do not make a sound.

“Hm,” Myra replies, as if considering this pronouncement. There's a clicking noise. “Okay. Look at the light for me. Follow it with your eyes.”

“Is...am I...right?” Lane asks after several seconds, his voice hesitant. Like he's in school, like he's getting graded on the answer.

“I don't know,” Myra says after a moment. There's a scribbling noise. “I'd guess it's probably hard for her to see you in pain. But she's your friend. What do you think it is?”

Another pause. Lane doesn't say anything. Joan can see the nurse's shadow through the thin curtain as she walks around the bed. “Your eyes look good. I'm going to check your reflexes.”

There's another minute's silence, and then—

“Are you angry at her?”

The question chills Joan's blood. God, what if he is angry with her? She doesn't know if she could stand for him to say yes—what if all of this is her fault, what if she said something—

“...I don't know.”

Joan wills herself to believe this answer doesn't matter. He says it to avoid questions all the time. She presses her lips into a thin line, rises from her chair, and steps quietly into the hallway.

**

Myra emerges from the doorway to Joan's right several minutes later, carrying Lane's chart under one arm. “There you are. I meant to tell you, we borrowed your notepad for a handwriting test. He's still writing out his letters.”

“He can keep it,” Joan says dully, glancing in the opposite direction so Myra doesn't notice the water glistening in her eyes. She's been leaning against the wall for several minutes, watching the movement of people and medical carts and gurneys through the area. “It's fine.”

A pause. “Joan? You all right?”
“I thought I could take care of everything,” Joan interrupts quickly, before she’s unable to say the words. It’s easier not to look at the other woman; they’re practically strangers, for god’s sake. “I took over all the work—my mother’s watching my son—I assumed it would be—”

She feels her throat constrict in an alarming way, and tries to breathe through the feeling. “I’m too close. That’s it.”

“Distance could be a good idea,” Myra says casually, as if she understands what Joan’s suggesting. At Joan’s dull glare, she holds up a hand, as if in surrender. “You can still be his friend without being his nurse.”

Joan lets out another long breath, glancing over the other woman. “Do you know who I would contact to—hire someone? Privately?”

Myra holds up her pointer finger, reaching into her uniform pocket, and pulling out a small gold compact. She opens it, and removes a single white card, which she hands to Joan for examination.

Myra Hodges, B.S., R.N., L.N.P. Followed by a phone number and mailing address.

“I’m filling in here for a colleague. But I’m free starting Thursday. If you’re interested.”

Joan feels almost dizzy with relief. She has to clear her throat in order to speak clearly. “Yes. I think that would be fine.”

By the time Lane arrives at their booth, he’s slightly out of breath, and leans heavily on his black walking stick as he sits down. Joan tried to get one that was elegant, one that wasn’t meant for some feeble old man, but he doesn’t like it. She doesn’t know the reason, but he hasn’t kept the feeling a secret.

“Damned thing,” he mumbles, as it falls to the floor and rattles loudly on the tile, even among the movement of the diner. When Joan moves to pick it up, he rolls his eyes. “Just—leave it.”

She doesn’t, just leans it against her side of the booth.

“Notebook, please,” Myra says into the charged silence, holding out her hand.

Lane fishes inside his suit jacket with an aggrieved noise, pulling out Joan's old stenography pad. It’s more battered than it used to be—the once pristine cover now scratched and ink-stained. “Why’re you so bloody insistent about it?”

Myra bobs her hand in the air in front of him, as if to say I’m not waiting forever, and Lane finally pushes the notebook into her hand. She makes a quick scrawl of the date, place, and time, and gives it back to him. He begins to write something underneath her heading.

His handwriting is slower and messier than it used to be. Joan’s going to have a harder time deciphering it once he comes back to work.

All the feelings aren’t going to come back at once, if ever, Myra told her, two weeks ago. Right now, he’s perking up, showing visible emotion, and that’s good. But it might not be tempered, and it might not be positive. We won’t know until we get there.

“I hate this notebook,” he says suddenly, in a petulant voice, like he’s a spoiled child. Some of the ink has smeared under his palm. “Paper’s too coarse.”
“So don't use it,” Joan retorts quietly. Her fingers itch for another cigarette, but she's trying not to smoke in front of him. Myra gives her a disappointed look at the barb—Joan's supposed to be more patient. She sighs. It is not easy to be patient with him when all he can express is negativity. It comes back in stages, she mentally repeats, it comes back in stages.

Lane ignores her. “And I don't like that doctor, either.”

“Last week you told me he was competent enough, you suppose,” Myra points out, with a wry look at Joan. “Did you get a look at the menu?”

“No,” Lane snaps, not looking up from his writing. “I'm just getting an egg. Is that all right?”

“It is if you don't bite my head off,” the nurse replies sharply.

Under his breath, Lane mumbles something that sounds like sorry. Joan glances away, toward the paper bag at her side. She's been trying to think of ways she can be supportive without becoming overbearing, which is...difficult. Harder than it should be. But she is trying.

Yesterday, she had to duck into a stationery store after work to buy a set of occasion cards, and while she was browsing, a wall of notebooks caught her eye. Lately, Lane's developed something close to hypergraphia, scribbling about everything from daily activities to his therapy sessions, and he's complained about her steno pad so often she felt a replacement journal might be in order.

“Lane, I saw something in the paperie I thought you'd appreciate,” she begins lightly, trying not to look at Myra as she takes the soft-cover leather notebook out of the bag, and slides it across the table toward him. “The store clerk said this brand is popular with writers. It's even got a pocket.”

He blinks at the cover, frowning at it as if he can't understand why it's so special. “It's black.”

“It's French,” Joan replies, with an awkward shrug.

“Oh,” Lane says, glancing at it with uncertainty. His fingers rest on the open pages of Joan's stenography pad, as if he's debating whether to reach out for the new notebook or continue writing in the hated one. Joan does not allow herself to take this hesitance personally. It's better than a negative reaction.

“That was a nice gesture. Don't you think you should thank her?” Myra prompts. Joan waves away the nurse's words, indicating it isn't necessary. She doesn't want to be thanked if he doesn't mean it. Stupid to think she could bribe him into positivity.

“It's fine,” she says, clearing her throat, and attempting to make conversation, as if everything is normal. “If it helps, I heard Picasso used these as sketchbooks.”

“He's complete shit,” Lane says with a scoff. “So it's worse, actually.”

Myra blinks, clearly surprised by the sentiment. Joan snorts out an amused noise, biting her tongue to keep from bursting into inappropriate laughter. “You have opinions about art?”

He has never—not even once—mentioned that he has studied, casually considered, or made snap judgments about the subject. He has that painting of naval ships hanging in his office, along with the hideous coat of arms, and until now, Joan assumed his wife had bought both of those things. He never seemed to care about artistry one way or the other.

“Well, most of it's awful,” Lane says tartly, beginning to write again. His head is bowed over his notebook. “Is that opinion enough?”
“Sure,” Joan says quickly, taking another sip of her tea to shield her smile, in case he looks up and thinks she's laughing at him. “Cubism is garbage. I don't care.”

Maybe he liked the ships. Maybe he picked that out himself in some market, years ago. It makes her curious. She’ll have to ask him about it.

He stops writing for a moment, shakes his ballpoint pen from side to side. She got him to switch from fountain pens on a temporary basis to keep him from dripping ink everywhere. “Damn it. Won't write.”

“You know, I always liked the impressionists,” she can't resist saying, innocently, in case it's an avenue of conversation he feels like pursuing.

“This pen is out of ink,” he complains, louder this time. “Have you got another?”

Chapter End Notes

Initially, I thought I'd written myself into a corner. When I started brainstorming about the time between Lane's hospital stay and higher-functioning recovery, in which he can do his own thing without getting checked on all the time, I kept asking myself "how the hell is Joan going to be able to juggle all of this without losing her damn mind?" Then I realized she obviously would lose her damn mind, have things spin out of control, and that a professional was needed to take the majority of these worries off her hands. Not to mention, Joan has no one to talk to about this situation. She needs an outlet and someone to brainstorm with, Lane needs a professional, and thus, we have Myra. I love Myra. She is a truth teller. We will find out more about her as the story goes on.

Plus, this new dynamic -- with (one of many) professionals at the helm of Lane's recovery -- helps Joan have a much healthier relationship with Lane both as a friend and as a person in general. Especially when he is snappish and petulant. Now that she doesn't feel like she is his entire support system, she can be involved in his care (still over-involved, bless) without feeling like she is killing herself trying to hold every loose end in place. At this point, I want her to learn that there are some things she can't personally fix, and that's fine, and she'll live.

Quote which inspired this chapter: "In a room where people unanimously maintain a conspiracy of silence, one word of truth sounds like a pistol shot.” — Czesław Miłosz
Chapter 10

June 1971

Thursday morning, Joan’s at her desk putting together a to-do list for next week, while Lane sits in an armchair across from her, reading the Journal. Every so often, he’ll make some comment on the stock report, or draw her attention to a headline, but for the most part, they sit in companionable silence.

He flips to the next page. She caps her pen, glances over her itinerary with a satisfied expression, and then reaches for the mail in her inbox: a bill, another bill, several pieces of junk mail, and the open cream-colored envelope that’s been sitting at the bottom of her tray for at least a month. Joan opens the letter and pulls out the handwritten invitation, glancing over the pretty cursive for what feels like the millionth time.

“Don’t forget we have Dawn’s dinner party on Saturday,” she says, with a little huff of breath. “I can’t believe they’re going through with this.”

Like she’s fooling anyone by calling it a dinner party. The invitations were hand-delivered almost two months ago; accompanied by a quiet warning (not everyone’s invited) and a little post-it note stuck to the back of their RSVP card. Don’t wear white.

Lane looks up from the newspaper. Blinks. “I should think it’s fairly obvious.”

“Those two are completely wrong for each other,” she retorts, pushing aside the envelope with a scoff. “This is a terrible idea.”

He levels her with a be nice expression: eyebrows rising in amusement, mouth turning up at the corners, and eyes reproachful. “Well, they’re—young.”

Meaning he thinks it’s cute. She huffs out a sigh.

“Why would they feel the need to get married?”

This time, Lane gives her a sly look over the top of his glasses, one that’s usually accompanied by the slight press of his hand on her hip as she’s getting undressed.

She makes an amused noise. “People don't need wedding rings to fool around.”

He’s still grinning.

“It’s an important decision,” she continues, rolling her eyes, “and it deserves consideration.”

“She's very prudent.” Lane reaches for his newspaper again, and opens it over his lap. “Perhaps they’re suited.”

Joan snorts out a sound that’s almost a laugh, shakes her head, and goes back to writing her list. Subject closed, apparently. Dawn’s practical, so it must be fine.
“You're such a romantic.”

He chuckles in response, and flips to the next page.

“Oh, Dow's up today.”

**

An intricately woven garland of artificial flowers is draped over the doorway to Dawn’s apartment. As Lane and Joan walk closer, a couple of young kids in their Sunday best – ringbearer and flower girl, by the looks of their outfits – fling the door open and burst outside into the hallway, giggling hysterically, running past them toward the stairs.

Joan takes in the scene with raised eyebrows, as they pause in the hallway. Her left hand rests on Lane's right bicep; she releases his arm to unbutton her black raincoat.

“Well, won't this be charming.”

“It's only for the ceremony.” Lane's studying the flower garland, and pokes at one leafy plastic vine with a finger, making an impressed face. “Reception's at that place we passed along the corner.”

“I saw that.” Joan adjusts her purse over one arm. The ceremony is extremely small, while the reception is for a larger group: coworkers, members of Dawn's church, and so on. It's clear the families couldn't agree on the size of the wedding.

She huffs out a breath. “You know, if they wanted to get married at home, they should have had the reception here, too. Or invited fewer people.”

“Could have disagreed on the size,” Lane says mildly. Joan snorts out a laugh. They'd decided months ago to save money and sanity by having a private ceremony at City Hall. It's all arranged. Kate and Lane's older brother will be their two official witnesses. They'd asked her mother if she wanted to come down. She'd just laughed.

Joanie, do I have to drive down to the city every time you get married?

Lane peers around the empty hallway with an apprehensive expression, as if someone's waiting to jump out at them once they try to step inside.

“Are we supposed to knock?”

“I don't think it matters.” Joan motions for him to come on.

**

After several minutes spent chatting with wedding guests, Lane goes to get more punch and disappears to god knows where. Joan continues to talk with Scarlett and her extremely boring fiance – the man’s a manager for some manufacturing company, but thinks he's the next Edison – until she can barely stand for boredom. She excuses herself, deciding to duck into a back bedroom so she can fix her face before the ceremony.

When she opens the door, expecting to see nothing more than the large pile of coats lying on the bed, she finds Dawn seated in front of the large bureau mirror, fully dressed in her gown, and the matron of honor standing over her with a can of hairspray. The girls stare at Joan's reflection in surprise before the friend makes a frantic gesture.

“Shut the door!”
Joan does, and slips quickly into the room, not wanting anyone else to get a glimpse of the bride.

“Val, be nice!” Dawn commands. She turns to give Joan an apologetic look before addressing her, with a shy wave. “Hi, Joan.”

“Sorry to interrupt,” Joan smiles as she looks over the bride’s gown and makeup. “You look beautiful.”

The white gown is very flattering for Dawn’s figure and dark skin: featuring long, elaborate lace sleeves and a high scoop neck collar. The bodice is satin, paired with an a-line skirt and completed by a cathedral lace veil that’s being pinned in the back. Looks antique. Her short hair is set into pretty curls. She’s also wearing eyeshadow and some bright lipstick in addition to her usual face. Joan privately thinks it suits her much better than the bare, practical makeup she wears to work.

Meanwhile, the matron of honor, who’s wearing a long purple gown and has her hair set in a stylish natural bob, keeps fussing over Dawn’s veil. Two hairpins are now clenched in her hand like weapons.

“Will you stop moving? I’m not done.”

Dawn dutifully turns back around, but she continues talking, catching Joan's eye in the mirror as her friend works. “I'm glad you and Mr. Pryce were able to come.”

Lane keeps saying that they’re not particularly close to either bride or groom, really, but Joan bites her tongue to keep from saying this out loud. “Well, I'm surprised you invited so many friends, considering the size of your apartment.”

Val snorts out a laugh. Joan amends her remark, to ensure Dawn doesn't take it as an insult. “I used to have a place just like this. It was very cozy.”

Good enough for a girl living with a roommate, or when she's first married.

“Peggy said the same thing.” Dawn says with a smile, tilting her head to the right side so Val can pin the veil from underneath. “She used a different word.”

“I haven't seen her yet.” Joan examines her reflection in her powder compact before snapping it closed.

Dawn and Val exchange an amused look, before the bride clears her throat. One corner of her mouth keeps twitching up into a smile. “She's a groomsman.”

Joan's mouth drops open.

Val bursts into helpless laughter. “Lord, that gets funnier every time I hear it.”

The bride rolls her eyes in her friend’s direction, but directs an apologetic smile toward Joan. “I’m sorry, I thought you already knew.”

Joan waves away the young woman's apology. “Well, I guess it makes sense.”

Even with Peggy at a different agency, creative is practically sewn together at the hip. But a female groomsman is beyond ridiculous.

“Someone's been reading too many issues of Ms.”

Val laughs again, slanting Joan an appreciative look. “Wait till you see her outfit. We tried to match
her to the bridesmaids' dresses first. That was a sight.”

She examines Dawn's reflection in the bureau mirror and lets out a sigh, releasing the veil. “Honey, this still won't sit the way you want.”

“Don't you dare say that,” Dawn pats lightly at the gauzy lace draped over her head, frowning at her friend in the mirror. “You know it was Granny's.”

Val makes a tutting noise, undisturbed. “I don't care if it's Mother Nichols' negligee. You want to go out there with limp lace?”

Dawn grimaces at the word negligee—while Joan has no idea who they're talking about—and finally grumbles out a response that sounds like well, fix it.

Val grabs another hairpin from a box on the bureau.

“See you girls in a minute.” Joan gives them a wink, and slips out the door.

**

Lane's tried the wedding punch, and made horrible small talk with strangers before the insistent press of people on all sides becomes too much to bear. He can’t go out into the hallway, or into the bedrooms, but the living room window is open. Peering out onto the balcony, Lane notices it's connected to a set of metal stairs. Fire escape.

Up a floor, from the roof, comes an aggrieved shout.

“Stan, you asshole!”

Weighing his options – continuing to talk to people he doesn't know, or to investigate the ruckus on the roof, which clearly involves Mr. Rizzo and Mr. Ginsberg – Lane decides on the second. Gingerly, he steps out the window and climbs up the fire escape staircase. His balance is rubbish, but he's able to make it by going slowly.

When he gets to the top of the stairs, he finds Peggy Olson doubled over in laughter several yards from the staircase, her arms wrapped around her stomach. Stan Rizzo, standing to her right with his back to the stairs, watches her with amusement, clutching a closed book by its spine. Twenty paces beyond both of them, Ginsberg paces in agitation, his tuxedo jacket flapping as he moves back and forth.

Mr. Rizzo crushes what Lane hopes is the remains of a cigarette under one foot. “You asked a lot of questions at the bachelor party.”

“It's for your own good,” Peggy adds, folding her arms over her chest in a way that suggests she's not to be crossed. Her severity is tempered by the fact that she's grinning. “And Dawn’s, technically.”

“Jesus! I hate you,” Ginsberg chokes out, “you're both—”

He stops talking, and stares straight at Lane. “When’d you get up here?”

“Oh, erm. Just now. Sorry.”

Lane avoids meeting the lad’s eyes. He's halfway into another apology before Peggy's got her arms around his shoulders in a hug.
“Hi! You look good,” she says as she releases him. “Did Joan pick this out?”

“Oh—I don't know,” he mumbles, ducking his head to obscure the fact that he's blushing. “You look...very modern.”

She's wearing trousers, a white blouse with a bow at the neck, and a black waistcoat instead of a dress.

Peggy laughs at this, pushing her curled hair out of her face. “Thanks. I'm a groomsman.”

He has no idea how to respond to such a pronouncement.

Thankfully, Mr. Rizzo can always be counted upon to interrupt. “Everyone cool downstairs?”

Lane stumbles for an apt description. “Yes—it’s, erm, nice.”

“Great.” Stan checks his watch, and turns back to Mr. Ginsberg. “Okay, ten minutes. I told Dawn I'd get you down with five to spare.”

“Oh, Jesus.” Ginsberg runs a hand through his hair, and immediately rubs the same palm across the outside of his trouser leg. “I'm gonna melt. I can't stop sweating. Why'd you put me in this jacket?”

“Take it easy,” Stan says, voice calm. “Give it to Peggy if you want.”

“Pop already downstairs?” Ginsberg asks in a rasp, not shedding the coat.

Peggy nods once. “Do you want us to—?”

“No—” Ginsberg chokes out, “don't bother him. I'm just—”

He growls out a frustrated noise, turning away from the group.

Several minutes later, Lane slides into his seat next to Joan, trying to avoid the prying eyes and curious looks that accompanied his clambering back into the wedding venue, just ahead of the groom’s party.

“Why were you all on the roof?” Joan asks in a whisper, quickly brushing brick dust from the side of one of his sleeves.

“Long story.” Lane waves a dismissive hand. “I'll tell you after.”

**

*July 1967*

“Just fucking kill me already,” Ginsberg groans as raised voices get louder on the other side of the shared wall, softly banging his forehead on the paper-covered surface of his desk in an attempt to drown out Lane and Joan's argument.

Stan watches this, shaking his head in a mix of pity and amusement. “Will you cut that out? You're
gonna give yourself a concussion.”

The door to the hallway swings open – hinges always squeak – and Stan swivels around in his chair to see Clara glaring at him. He can't help laughing at the frown on her face. Pete must've yelled at her again.

“What do you want me to do? Bang on the transom?”

“Mr. Campbell says he can't concentrate,” she says in a clipped voice.

Lane came back to work thin, pale, and shaky on his feet, even with that cane. They all had about four days of normalcy before he and Joan started cutting into each other over every stupid mishap. After a few weeks, Stan isn't sure what the hell those two have left to fight about, but the arguments keep getting louder every day, and although everyone's too chickenshit to say anything to Lane or Joan directly, it's driving the collective office up the wall.

“He has headphones,” Stan answers with a shrug of one shoulder, remembering the giant hi-fi that sits to the left of Pete's door. “What does he care?”

“Why is this our goddamn problem?” Ginsberg blurts from the corner, rummaging through one of his desk drawers.

Stan doesn't say this often, but the kid's got a point. Get Cooper in there to referee, or Roger, or even Don. Lane and Joan are company partners, while he and Ginzo are creative lowlifes. Lowlifes don’t get involved.

“Yeah, we're not doing it.”

Clara shoots him the dirtiest look she can muster—it's kind of working for him, to be honest—and marches back to her desk without another word. He can hear her heels clicking on the floor as she storms away.

Behind the shared wall, there's a sound like furniture scraping on tile floor, followed by Joan's voice. She gets high-pitched when she's angry. He can even pick out half the words at this point:

—I don't know why—this—promised me—

Jesus. Never ends. He's no sooner turned back to his sketch in an attempt to work when he hears a loud throat clearing from the doorway.

When he looks up, he sees Dawn crossing her arms over her chest, frowning at them with pity in her eyes.

“Hi,” is all she says.

“Oh, c'mon, Chambers,” he groans, going a little theatrical. She's grown on him. She doesn't care if he jokes around with her when the bosses aren't watching, long as he doesn't use the word goddamn. “You're killing me here.”

“Well, it's not your fault,” she says briskly, and thank you, it's fucking nice of somebody to point that out, for once. “Mr. Draper wants to know what's going on.”

“Murder,” Ginzo pipes up in one of his weird outbursts, like it's some kind of grand epiphany. Stan puts a palm to his forehead, briefly, then lifts his head and slants a glance at Dawn, who looks like she wants to roll her eyes. She doesn't.
“Who the hell knows?” He checks his watch. It’s got to be over soon. “I give it five minutes, max, before one of them gets laryngitis.”

Dawn exhales a breath through her nose, shaking her head like this is the most pathetic thing she’s ever heard in her life.

“Okay. I’ll tell him.”

“Fantastic.” He lets out a sigh.

**

They’re less than ten minutes into the scheduled traffic meeting before the next argument starts. Pete’s out for some account lunch—or maybe he’s skipping, at this point, who knows—so it’s just finance, him and Ginzo, Ken, and then Harry. Joan’s already pissed off. Stan can tell by the way she practically rips the cap off her ballpoint pen, and the second they’re done listing account names, it all goes to hell, fast.

“Lane, if you'll hand out the newest quarterlies, please.”

“Sorry—I don't have those,” Lane’s frowning at Joan as if she’s insane. “You said they were all in your office.”

Her lips tighten. “No, I said you needed to bring them—”

Before the two of them can really get into it, Ginzo beats them all to the punch, banging two hands on the table with a frustrated groan.

“Jesus, will you two quit fighting for one second of your lives? I can't handle it anymore!”

Everyone stares at the kid, completely stunned.

Stan risks a glance back at Lane and Joan to see how they're taking this outburst. Lane's avoiding everyone’s eyes, turning so red it looks like he's been sunburned, while Joan's face is drained of all color. She's glaring at Ginsberg like she could burn holes in his head just by looking, and after another second, she slams her pen down onto the wooden table, stands up, and points a shaking finger toward the lobby.

“Outside.”

“Oh, god.” Ginzo stumbles to his feet and around the table toward the glass doors as if pulled on strings. “Joan, sometimes I get this weird feeling on the back of my neck—”

She practically drags him out of the room like a little kid, her hand clamped around his elbow, and they disappear into her office by the back door. Poor guy's toast.

“We'll come back,” Ken says into the silence, shooting a significant look at Harry, who jumps up immediately, and follows the other man out the door.

Lane rubs a hand across his face, pulling something out of his jacket pocket – a black notebook – that he flips open with a loud sigh. After a second, he glances around in confusion, searching under his papers and in his other pockets.

Looking for a pen, Stan guesses. He slides a fine-point sharpie across the table toward the older man, taking pity on him. It rolls to a stop against Joan's teacup, but Lane doesn't grab it right away,
although he clearly sees it. It's like he's so embarrassed he's frozen in place. The sudden quiet is worse than the yelling, and so Stan decides to break it as a kind of peace offering.

“Kid doesn't know when to keep his mouth shut.”

Lane gives a shrug, as if to say it's fine, but they both know it's not, and they might as well quit bullshitting, especially since they can hear Ginsberg blurtting frantic apologies to Joan through the shared wall.

*Jesus, please just—yell at me already! Yell at me!*

Shit. If Joan's not even speaking, that's bad. Ginzo is fucked.

“Look,” he says to Lane, trying to keep it casual over the sounds of the kid having a nervous breakdown. “I don't know what you and Joan are arguing about all the time, but it's loud as hell, and everyone's too chickenshit to tell you to keep it down during business hours.”

The other man is silent. Stan doesn't know if Lane's angry or surprised or what, but he's not dragging him out by the ear, so it's probably safe to keep going.

“Popular theory is if we tell you to shut up, it'll drive you into another coronary or Joan into a homicide precinct. Or both.”

“They—” Lane begins, but stops, and shakes his head. “Erm...”

Next door, Ginsberg’s gone silent, too; a weird awkwardness lingers in its place.

Stan's fingers itch to doodle something in the margin of his spreadsheets, but he doesn't look away from Lane. If the guy's got something else to say, might as well hear it.

Lane clears his throat, and finally seems to get his thoughts together.

“We'll—try to keep it quiet. Sorry.”

He reaches for the marker Stan had given him earlier, and begins to write something in his notebook.

Stan snorts out a surprised noise, clamping down on the impulse to make a joke. Hey, he's fulfilled the unpleasant duty. He didn't die.

“Thanks, man.”

Heh. Duty. He steals Ginzo’s pen, and starts to draw a stick figure in a stockade.

“Mr. Pryce?” Scarlett pokes her head into the conference room from the lobby. “Sorry to interrupt. Joan, um, said to tell you this meeting is rescheduled.”

Lane stares back at the girl, his mouth falling open a little.

“Did she—*leave*?”

His secretary nods, biting her lower lip. “I think so.”

Silence falls over the room. Scarlett gives them an awkward wave, unhappiness written all over her face, and walks back toward her desk.

The door squeaks as it shuts.
“Okay. Good meeting.” Stan stands up, gathering up his stuff as quickly as possible. Once he's walking, he doesn't even look back to see if Lane's getting up, just wants to get the hell out of there before his luck runs out.

He gets back to creative and sees Ginzo slumped in his desk chair like a kindergartener who’s just gotten a time out, sniffling in a suspicious way.

“Jesus. She made you cry?”

Ginsberg mops at his face with his jacket sleeve. His voice wobbles. “No.”

It is officially too early in the morning for this shit.

Stan reaches for the plastic cooler underneath his desk, where they've started keeping extra beer. Probably room temperature by now, but he doesn’t care.

“Okay, I need a drink.”

**

In the afternoon, they pick up the work right where they’d left off this morning, before the arguments, with Joan sitting in the same wooden chair in Lane’s office, to the left of the door. He doesn’t ask where she’s been since the traffic meeting, and she doesn’t volunteer any answers.

By dusk, she’s nursing a headache. They’ve made decent progress on invoices from Ponds to Topaz, but her concentration has waned. Her last break was at two something, and it's nearly seven.

Joan glances over at Lane, still working on the sofa, who's obviously just as exhausted as she is. Every so often, his eyes flutter closed, and his head bows over his work, only to snap upright after a few seconds.

“Lane, go home if you want.” She lets out a sigh. “I'll finish these.”

“No,” he says, with more force than she expected. She raises an eyebrow.

He’s flushed and drawn, like he’s running a fever, but he straightens up and rubs at his eyes, like he’s determined to prove he’s just fine.

“I’m—I don’t want to argue, but I’m staying.”

Jesus. She doesn’t even have the energy to ask him why.

“Okay.”

Ten minutes later, Joan looks over to ask him a forgotten question about Fillmore Auto, but Lane's fast asleep, with his head slung back onto the cushion. His grip on the clipboard in his hand has slacked, and papers are slowly spilling to the floor, but he doesn't move. His mouth is slightly open, breathing quiet, as if he's too tired even to snore.

She can’t help studying his face. He looks haggard. Dark circles are visible under his eyes, mottling the fair skin. Joan lets all the harsh truths flood her mind, now, while she’s got a minute to herself. His short-term memory has been slow to improve—slower than she thought it would be. He hates that she’s micromanaging him, and he hates all her methods—even little things like organizing the papers in file folders alphabetically, instead of by date. He’s angry, and she’s frustrated, and
everyone in this agency needs something from her all the time—it just zaps all her energy, these
days. She works and works and feels like she’s never going to catch up.

The clipboard in his lap suddenly clatters to the floor. Joan pushes these thoughts out of her head,
while Lane makes a sort of strangled noise, snapping alert with a jerk. Papers fly everywhere.

"God," he says, voice rough. "How long was I—?"

She tries to reassure him. "It was barely a catnap."

He removes his glasses briefly, rubbing his eyes. "Sorry. ‘M awake."

Ten minutes later, he’s fighting sleep again. For god’s sake, he’s being as stubborn as a child. This is
exactly how Kevin gets when he won’t go down for a nap.

Joan stands up, her decision made, and takes the teapot from the service on his side table. He
watches her with bleary eyes.

"Just going to boil some water. Be right back."

In the kitchen, she puts the kettle on, and then sails straight into her office, searching through the
middle drawer of her desk until she finds the item she’s looking for – a single packet of extra-strength
aspirin. Powder form. If Lane refuses to take care of himself, she’ll just have to do it. He can be
furious with her if he wants, but for god’s sake, whatever cold war they’re currently having can wait
until he’s less exhausted.

She pours the powder into Lane’s cup, and pours steaming black tea over it, stirring the mixture
together carefully and adding more tea until the surface of the amber-colored liquid is clear and dark.

Half an hour later, Lane’s drained his cup and is sound asleep, slumped to his left on the sofa, his
head hovering over the arm of the couch.

Joan shakes her head. Well, at least the aspirin did the trick. She watches him carefully for signs of
alertness, but he doesn’t even twitch. His glasses are askew on his face. After a moment of
consideration – will it wake him? – she leans forward, and removes them carefully. Her fingertips
brush his cheek as she draws back.

Lane stirs at the contact, mumbling something too quiet for Joan to hear as she sets his glasses on the
coffee table next to the tea tray. She shushes him, placing her free hand on his shoulder.

"It’s all right."

He shifts onto his back, pillowing his head on the armrest with a little sigh.

Joan gathers up her pile of invoices and leaves the room, closing the door behind her. Scarlett’s
typewriter is covered, and she decides to work here for a little while, so she can keep an eye on the
door.

When Lane shuffles out of his office over an hour later, bleary-eyed and leaning heavily on his
walking stick, he walks up to the desk, and clears his throat.

“IT was bitter, you know. The—aspirin."

Joan doesn’t bother pretending innocence, just pushes her papers aside before meeting his gaze. God.
Of course he’d taste it. How could she forget that?
He clears his throat again. “You wouldn’t—not that you’re aware, but I, erm, don’t sleep well, most
nights. I’m sorry if it bothered you.”

Oh, shit. She closes her eyes, briefly, willing herself to stay calm. Deep breath in, deep breath out.
This is what you get for meddling.

“I just saw that you were tired,” is all she says, voice very small. She doesn’t voice her next few
thoughts, which border on a plea. Do I push you too hard? Does any of this matter? “You don’t
have to pretend you aren’t tired.”

Her mind flashes back to this morning—to Michael Ginsberg standing in front of her desk in a
complete tizzy, while she said nothing, staring at the closed door behind him.

Can’t you stop arguing for one second of your lives?

All she could do was ask a single question.

What do you want from me?

After a minute, Ginsberg had noticed the water in her eyes before she could blink it away; this was
what had finally made him stop shouting. His mouth fell open as he sat down heavily in one of her
upholstered chairs.

Oh, god, Joan, I’m sorry, I never—I’ll keep my mouth shut—god, please don’t look at me like that—
my stomach’s in knots—

Joan lets out a breath, and looks back up at Lane. He’s still standing there, motionless, and gauging
her expression with the weirdest look on his face. Like he feels guilty for bringing this up—for
wanting to determine his own sleep schedule.

Jesus. She’s the one who did something stupid, not him.

She swallows the lump in her throat.

“I’m sorry.”

A shadow shifts in his face—his eyes widen slightly in surprise, or maybe in frustration. She’s not
good at judging his mood, these days.

They stare at each other for several seconds before he finally speaks.

“Not your job to take care of me.”

His voice is still quiet, but forceful, like he’s been waiting to say this to her for weeks and she’s
finally ready to listen.

This done, he shifts on his feet as if he’s going to leave; Joan grabs for his left hand before he can
move out of reach. Lane’s palm is between both of hers, and she’s leaning forward a little due to the
odd angle, but he doesn’t pull away, or ask her to let go. He’s just watching her face again, waiting
for her to speak.

“I just want you to feel better. That’s all.”

It’s the most childish thing she’s ever said; she hates the words almost as soon as they come out of
her mouth.
Lane doesn’t say anything, but he’s still watching her. The lingering silence is horrible. Joan releases his hand, and gives him a tremulous smile, making her voice as airy as possible when she speaks.

“Well. We should go home.”

She stands up, collects the remaining invoices into one large, messy pile and deposits this on Bridget’s desk with very little ceremony.

Lane doesn’t look like he believes her sudden cheer.

“You’re—sure?”

Joan nods, pretending to search for a pencil among the secretary’s things so he doesn’t see the tension in her face. She’ll just…come in early tomorrow to finish the rest.

“Yes. It’ll be fine.”

Two minutes later, Lane emerges from his office wearing his hat and coat. He shuts his office door behind him, trying to wrangle his walking stick into submission as he fumbles with his keys.

Joan scrawls one last notation onto a yellow post-it, sticks this to the top of the remaining invoices, and turns out the desk lamp.

“Good night.”

He glances over, pocketing his keys. In the dark, his face is shadowed; all she can see is the barest glint of street light filtering through the open doorway, reflecting off the lenses of his glasses.

“Oh—and to you.”

Chapter End Notes

The next two chapters have been in various stages of writer’s block for months, but with the finale date approaching, I wanted to start posting updates and finally get this story finished! One of my biggest S7 disappointments (before MW drove poor Ginsberg into the ground) was that Ginzo and Dawn never got more screen time together. I loved their little flirtatious interactions in the first two episodes, and decided to run with that here. I also built a big chunk of my Dawn head canon right after reading this Dawn/Ginsberg fic by mad_and_moonly, which is just gorgeous. Check it out if you get a chance.

At this point, the Lane and Joan dynamic is all about the two of them getting used to working with each other again, and trying to find some semblance of footing amid a rough transition. I think it’s important to show that for all she cares about him as a friend, and tries to help him feel better, Joan’s not going to be the perfect nurse. She’ll push him too hard, or get stuck in a cycle of frustration, or try to take on everything herself.
August 1967

At the breakfast table, Kevin stabs at his plate with a rubber-tipped spoon, gurgling to himself and smearing bits of cooked apples all over his face every time he takes a bite of food. Sitting in a chair a few feet beside him, wearing her thick yellow housecoat, reading glasses, and her blue plastic curlers, Joan’s mother is thumbing through an old issue of Photoplay, not even bothering to help him eat.

“Mom, for god’s sake,” Joan huffs, grabbing her satchel from her vanity chair, and fixing the collar of her raincoat with one hand as she breezes into the living room. “It’s all over the floor.”

Gail looks up from her magazine with a skeptical expression, arching an eyebrow in a way that means she’s already seen it, and doesn’t care.

“Joanie, he’s a baby. They make messes.”

“I know that.” Joan rifles through her purse one last time to make sure she’s got everything. Her favorite lipstick keeps going missing, and always ends up in her mother’s room. She says that’s Kevin’s fault. Joan thinks that excuse is bullshit. “Just don’t let it dry on the carpet, or else—”

“Or else what? You’re never here. Why would it bother you?”

Joan almost shuts her finger in her pocketbook clasp, she jerks her head up so quickly. The older woman’s smirking, and sets the magazine aside with a sigh, reaching for a still-burning cigarette in her ashtray.

“You work twelve hour days, barely eat, and your baby sees more of me and Greta put together than he does you. He hardly even says the word mama. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“You’re unbelievable,” Joan spits, struggling to keep her temper under control in front of her son. “Maybe I should just let us starve to death. We can live like those hippie kids on communes, or under some bridge. Is that what you want?”

Her mother seems unfazed. “You can deny it. There’s providing, and there’s avoiding, and you know what you want?”

It hurts so much she might as well have slapped Joan across the face.

“I can’t believe you’re bringing this up right now.”

Joan straightens her spine, walks over to Kevin with a paper napkin in hand, and cleans apple gunk from his little cheek.

He looks up, startled, and waves one chubby fist in her direction, babbling a few nonsense words before saying a few real ones.

“Mama bye bye!”
Her mother gives Joan a significant look.

Jesus. Joan summons up the biggest smile she can muster, and kisses Kevin’s cheek, although she feels like crying. “Bye, sweetheart.”

When she shuts the apartment door behind her, there’s a lead lump forming in her stomach, and she feels like a failure.

**

Lane leaves the office for lunch sometime around noon, but he’s only gone ten minutes before he realizes he’s left his notebook behind. It’s not in any of his pockets. He can’t remember where it is, exactly, but it’s probably in his office somewhere – perhaps the sofa, or a drawer, or on some table.

Myra will be furious if he isn’t—no, that’s not the right word. What would she be, exactly? Oh, he’ll just have to go back.

By the time he’s reached the office, and is unlocking his door with a sheepish glance at the secretaries, he’s decided the best way to explain it. *I’m sorry for my lateness, but I—misplaced—the diary, and had to go back for it.*

He pushes the door open, but freezes in the doorway when he spies movement in the corner, on the sofa, and notices a familiar flash of red hair.

Joan’s sitting with her back turned to him, and seems to be in the middle of opening a—ladies’ thing, the round ones—*compact.* But her hands fumble with the clasp for several seconds, and there’s a loud sniff, and after another moment she just tosses it onto the coffee table, her shoulders slumping.

He can tell she’s heard him come in, and shuts the door quickly so they’re not overheard, not sure what to say, or what to do.

“Sorry, I, erm, left my notebook—I didn’t mean—”

She stands now, body turned slightly to the right and away from him. “No, I just—need a minute.”

A small silence blankets the room, only punctuated by intermittent sniffling.

Lane’s not sure if she wants him to voice the question at the back of his mind, but he glances around the room, notices his notebook sitting plainly in the middle of his desk, and moves to pocket this before he can forget it a second time.

From this angle, he can see her face, or at least, the portion not covered by the palm of her hand, which is pressed to her mouth. When she realizes he’s watching her, Joan pulls her hand away, eyes widening; they’re bloodshot, and her cheeks and nose are a brilliant red from crying.

Lane stops himself from walking forward, his brow furrowed in concern. So it wasn’t—she must have been in here for several minutes, at least.

Under his gaze, she lets out a tiny sigh.

“My mother…”

But she doesn’t finish the sentence, simply bites down on the rest of her explanation with a grimace, as if it’s too painful to keep going. In the silence that follows, she picks up her compact again, flashing him an embarrassed look and wiping her damp eyes as quickly as she can.
“You’ll be late for Myra,” she says instead, waving her free hand toward the door. “You should go.”

Lane can’t find the words to say he doesn’t think that matters now, but after a hesitation, he does as she’s asked. There’s a dull pounding in the back of his head, like the start of one of his headaches, and he spends the walk to the usual restaurant fearing the worst before he recognizes the sensation for what it is: curiosity.

Why was Joan crying? What was she going to tell him? Had her mother made her cry? What could anyone have said to make Joan so unhappy? And why would she hide it? Why would she pretend everything was all right if it wasn’t?

It’s been so long since he experienced curiosity of any kind that the feeling overwhelms him, and he spends fifteen minutes wondering all these things aloud before Myra interrupts him.

“You know all of those questions depend on outside information.”

He sighs, and can’t help grumbling a little at being interrupted. “You’re telling me to ask another one.”

She takes a bite of her sandwich in response. He glances down at his notebook, today’s entry only filled with words—adjectives, he corrects himself. They’re, erm, parts of speech. Beside one of them—worried—Myra has written a single question in small cursive. Why?

“Why am I—worried?”

Lane glances up at Myra, gauging her expression. She’s put her sandwich aside, her hazel eyes watching him carefully, but there’s no clue as to what she wants him to say.

“I don’t know.” He winces. She hates that phrase. “It’s—”

He pushes at his boiled potatoes with the tines of his fork, then gets an idea, and drops the fork onto his plate, picking up his journal to flip backwards a few pages.

“Don’t pretend,” he says aloud, his mouth pursing in surprise. Joan had said that to him the other day, only she’s still doing it, and if pretending to be fine at work when he isn’t is bad for his health, then it’s bad for hers. “We said we were to be honest with one another. Or, at least, I…promised I would do.”

He winces as the faintest memory from the hospital rises into his mind—lying in bed like a limp dishrag, feverish and throbbing and miserable, unable to make himself speak, and Joan standing over him, smoothing hair away from his clammy forehead with her fingers as if he were a sick child—

Something new occurs to him.

“Do you think—we—work too much?”

Myra chokes on her water, and just as he’s thinking oh, god, she’s laughing at me, she’s already waving her hands no, gesturing toward his journal. Her voice is raspy as she muffles a cough.

“Look up your second or third entry, and you tell me.”

He does, and frowns at the handwriting here, from months before. It’s shaky and large like a child’s, but he pushes through the embarrassment of seeing it printed out, and reads aloud:
“Went to the office this morning. Came home after dark.”

Lane looks up to glimpse Myra’s knowing expression, and flips back to the entry he’d been studying before, from the other evening. Here, in a less messy scrawl that isn’t as crooked: *I couldn’t go home. It was humiliating.* He flips through a few more pages.

“Well, Joan’s always there before I am, and after I leave.” Another thought enters his mind. “Would she keep the same hours, if it weren’t for—what I did?”

“I think you used to like keeping long hours, yourself,” Myra says evenly.

He rushes to defend himself.

“No, that’s different, I was—”

Realization hits him with such force it’s like a physical blow. *Oh, god.*

Lane shuts his eyes against the rest of the unsaid thought, and reaches for his pen. If he can’t say it aloud, he has to get it onto the paper so she can see it; that’s their agreement. When he finishes writing, the word’s spelled out in thick black ink, and smudged at the end, which makes it seem more final.

_Fraid._

After a hesitation, he turns the notebook around so Myra can read it. Immediately, she nods her head in a way that eases the tightness in his chest—she’s not going to tell him he’s wrong, or make noises of pity—but she doesn’t hound him about it, either, just asks one other question.

“What scared you?”

He wants to say *I don’t know,* but under her steady gaze, forces himself to come up with another way to describe this thing, this feeling, and scrawls two more words next to the first.

_Felt useless._

Rebecca had…well, made it clear she never needed him, but the agency always did, and then it didn’t, and Nigel was gone, and everyone else—

“You’re not useless.”

Lane shrugs in response, in a way that means he’s heard what she says, but his hand itches to pick up the pen again. Don’t admit you’re weak. Don’t tell anyone.

“You want to scratch the word out?” Myra takes another drink of her water. “Go ahead.”

His fingers slide over the slick paper. Scratch them out, scratch them out, scratch them out—but there’s a pernicious voice in the back of his head, just a bit louder than the other one, saying no, leave them alone. Look at them. Say them. *You’re afraid. Afraid you’ll be useless. Afraid you are useless._

“Joan’s doing—more than her share,” he says instead, clearing his throat, and looking up. “Of—of the work.”

Myra raises an eyebrow.

“Well, she is,” Lane huffs, gesturing toward the paper, where the horrid words still stand out in bold letters. He closes the notebook to keep from seeing them. “And I’m not—it’s not—fair.”
“So, you’re saying you want to do more?” Myra takes another chip from her plate. She’s not quite looking at him, though, she’s looking at his walking stick, shoved into the corner of the booth. He follows her gaze, not understanding, and they both blink at it for a few seconds before he turns back to her.

*I don’t know. Yes, I—ought to—but—*

“I’m,” his mouth feels dry as he tries to choke out the word, “nervous.”

**What if he can’t do it?**

“That’s not a bad thing.” She gives him a small smile. “But if you’re serious about taking on more work, you’re going to have to talk that out with Joan, make a plan. It’s not going to be like it was before.”

“No…normality,” he sighs, more or less aware of what she means—the other night proved that point well enough, there isn’t going to be hours and days of uninterrupted work anymore—and what if there never shall be?

**What happens if he really is a failure?**

Myra smiles at him again. It isn’t terribly reassuring.

“Let’s put your journal away for now.”

Lane returns to the office with a takeaway bag gripped in his free hand—Myra’s idea—and when he knocks on the door of Joan’s office, and promptly sets this onto one side of her desk, she stares at the small paper bag in surprise, her brow creasing into a frown. She’s wearing her reading glasses, and looks a bit tired around the eyes, although the telltale signs of her crying are long gone.

He can’t quite meet her gaze as he speaks.

“You don’t have to eat it, if you’re not—I don’t even remember what we ordered, to be perfectly frank.”

She reaches for the container, lifts the lid, and lets out a sigh, her frown shifting into an expression he can’t read. God, she probably hates it.

“Anyway,” Lane says, with a little shrug. “Erm. Sorry about—before.”

He turns to go.

“Thank you,” she murmurs, and he stops in front of her door, turns slightly toward her voice again. Least she isn’t angry. He thought she might be.

“Oh. Well—all right, then.”

**

They’re finishing up a second draft of the first quarter budget this week, which has been a slow and torturous process. Last week, Lane said he wanted to speak to her about something important, and that he wanted to keep from feeling useless, which to Joan’s mind meant he was ready to start challenging himself. Setting a pace for this transition has been…difficult.

He gets up from his seat behind his desk, walking over to show her some projection he’s been working on, but stumbles slightly before he can get around the table, and promptly drops his cane.
Joan watches as he shuts his eyes against the mishap, and when she speaks, she’s careful to keep her voice neutral.

“Do you want—”

Before she can finish the sentence, Lane kicks the walking stick across the floor with a wordless growl. It skitters on the tile, bumping into the legs of the red armchair as it clatters toward the wall.

“I hate that bloody thing.”

His voice is breathless, like it was tiring even to say those few words.

Joan puts her work aside.

“My father’s got one just like it,” he continues. “I don’t want it.”

She takes a moment to decide her best course of action. He said he wanted to be challenged, and if he meant it, Joan can be the devil’s advocate here. Myra says she thinks he’ll be able to walk without the walking stick, in time. Maybe this is the way to get him to work toward that goal.

“So, how could you get rid of it?”

Anger and frustration tangle on his face as he turns to stare at her. Joan stares right back, leveling him with an unimpressed look.

In the end, he breaks first, and looks away.

She can’t help prompting him. “Does your doctor have any suggestions on how to improve your balance? Or Myra?”

Lane sighs, runs a hand over his still-red face.

“I don't know.”

Joan lets out a sigh.

“Yes, you do.”

Lane makes an aggravated noise at her response, waving his hand through the air as if this gesture will set the matter to rest.

“Lane.” Her voice is as level as she can manage. “Your balance was affected. It's not just going to fix itself overnight.”

“Yes, thank you for pointing out the obvious.”

“For god’s sake,” Joan snaps, not appreciating his flippancy, “did you think you were going to wake up and everything would be the same?”

“I didn't imagine I would be awake,” he hisses, “so it doesn’t matter.”

It terrifies her when he talks like that, even if it’s true. She bites her tongue so hard she tastes blood.

Lane looks from her pale, stressed expression to the cane on the floor.

“Don't look at me like I've gone mad.”
“I'm not looking at you that way,” she says in a monotone, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“You are,” Lane insists. “Everyone sees me stumbling about with this—thing—they think I'm an old fool.”

“Well, you're not,” Joan counters. “And if people are looking twice at you, then they’re idiots. What the hell do they know?” She lifts up her hands in a kind of shrug, wishing she could land on the perfect combination of words to reassure him. Why would he give her such a personal reason for not wanting the cane if he doesn’t want her help getting rid of it?

*My father has one just like it.* He’s never talked about his father before.

There's a long silence, in which Lane fiddles with his cufflink, Joan takes two aspirin from a bottle kept in her purse, and they do not look at each other.

Finally, she breaks this with a peace offering.

“Maybe you could take up walking.”

Lane sighs. “No, don’t—give me suggestions.”

She waves an arm toward the cane on the floor, trying to keep harshness from her voice. “Well, I didn't say it would cure you. I don't know what it would do except strengthen your legs. And if you hate that thing so much, that's one way you might finally be able to get rid of it.”

He doesn’t answer her for at least a minute. Joan's ready to get up, go into her own office and call it a day, when Lane finally speaks, in a tone that suggests he wishes she would disappear.

“Where exactly am I supposed to go walking.”

“You don’t have to go anywhere.” Joan’s relieved they’re able to have another second of discussion about this without screaming at each other. She decides to try and lighten the mood, even while knowing that he’s not going to laugh. “You might not even have to leave your apartment. Just take the stairs.”

He raises his eyebrows, like this is the weirdest thing she’s ever said, but just blinks at her, straight-faced, and shuffles back around his desk.

Two days later she puts a catalog at the top of his inbox, from the store where she’d originally purchased the first walking stick. If he hates the damn thing that much, maybe getting a different one will help him in the meantime.

**

Monday afternoon arrives, and they’ve been working on page fourteen of the budget for over an hour when there’s a hesitant knock at the door, followed by Scarlett’s voice.

“Mr. Pryce?”

Lane sighs, looking up from his pieces of scratch paper. “Yes, what is it?”

Scarlett enters, crossing the room in a few quick steps, and slips a large, sealed envelope onto his desk, handing him a receipt on a clipboard to sign.

“This just arrived for you, from England. Courier mail.”
Joan lets her gaze flick from the young secretary back to Lane, who hands the clipboard back to Scarlett, and stares at the face of the envelope with an expression close to resignation.

“Thank you,” he says quietly.

Scarlett gives him a smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes, closing the door behind her as she leaves.

Lane meets Joan’s eyes for a fraction of a second, then turns back to the budget draft, ignoring the unopened envelope.

It’s the last round of his divorce settlement, if she had to guess.

Joan gives him a sympathetic look. “You’re not going to open it?”

He clears his throat, reaches for the budget draft, and flips to page fifteen. “Item twenty. Expenses for Secor.”

She gives a little *hmph* at his attempt to avoid the question, but turns her attention back to the spreadsheet in her lap. Secor's got four percent of the overall agency budget, although Pete and Harry are doing little more than upkeep. That money could be better allocated.

“I know what it is,” Lane says after another moment, causing Joan to glance up at him. “The envelope. It can wait.”

His eyes dart toward the manila parcel again, and linger there. She sighs.

“Doesn’t help to put it off.”

Lane’s brow furrows in a frown, though he doesn’t lift his head from his work. “You should talk.”

Joan cocks an eyebrow. Even with the monotone, it’s as if he’s opening up the subject for debate. She can’t remember the last time they had a discussion about anything that wasn’t borne out of sheer frustration. “What?”

He looks up, and gauges her surprised expression; his gaze flicks down to her hands, folded primly on her stenography pad.

“Your—rings. You still wear them.”

She glances down, briefly, and studies the gold bands on her third finger. The engagement diamond winks slightly as it catches sunlight from the window.

“It isn't sentimental,” she says, with a little huff.

The noise Lane makes indicates he disagrees.

She’s surprised that he’s pointing any of this out at all, and narrows her eyes, trying to get him to elaborate. “You don’t believe me?”

Lane meets her gaze for a brief moment. “No.”

Joan lifts her shoulders in an exaggerated shrug.

“Well, the rest of the office has formed theories about my divorce.” She fixes him with an arch look that dares him to deny this, though they both know he has no knowledge of office gossip. “You might as well share yours.”
He clears his throat, obviously ill at ease.

“It’s—they’re your wedding rings,” he says awkwardly, after a long silence. “Regardless of the, erm, outcome of your marriage, the sentiment of the jewelry is inherent. Based on—t-the manner in which it was given. Severing that link would be impossible.”

He looks away, as if he’s embarrassed to have offered his opinion.

One corner of her mouth keeps quirk ing up into a small smile. She hasn’t heard him talk this much in weeks. If talking about divorce engages him in a topic of conversation other than work, she'll play along.

“You think I still have feelings for Greg.”

His eyes dart back to hers, expression morphing from hesitant to alarmed, and she has to stifle a laugh.

“I'm not offended.”

Anger is one of several feelings she still harbors for her ex-husband, so technically, Lane isn't wrong. Joan allows herself to smile a little wider, and marks through a typo in the middle of the page, waiting for him to speak.

“Why else—” he begins, then seems to regret his choice of words, picking up his discarded work with a sigh. “Never mind.”

“You're curious. It isn't a crime.”

A frown flickers over his face, and he shakes his head.

“It's none of my business.”

As Joan stares down at the rings on her own left hand, an impulsive idea comes to mind. She curls her fingers around the gold bands, tugging them from her ring finger in a gentle, purposeful movement.

She holds them between her finger and thumb for a moment, her hand poised in the air as if showing them off to a prospective buyer. The metal is worn and scratched in a few places, but they're still bright, and the diamond is unclouded—still beautiful. After another moment, she sets the bands on the surface of Lane's desk, on the few square inches of uncluttered space near the edge. The gold glints against the mahogany.

Lane says nothing, but is clearly watching her movements, confusion written all over his face.

Joan's fingers lay flat against the dark-stained wood, while her palms balance against the lip of the desk. Her fingertips can almost graze the bands, but she makes no move to touch them, or to put them back on.

She doesn’t know why she wants to share any of this with him, but it feels important; even if he wasn’t the one to file the papers, he should know he isn’t the only person ever to get out of a bad marriage.

“Greg signed up for the Army without telling me. And after his first tour of Vietnam—Kevin was three months old—he volunteered for another one, also without telling me. I wanted to kill him, but I told him to leave, instead.”
Lane's eyebrows raise so high they're in danger of disappearing into his hairline. "Good lord."

Joan can't help smiling at his incredulous expression. "Well, we had—several problems, but that was essentially the tipping point."

She straightens up in her chair, inclining her head toward the gold bands.

"Wearing them deflects attention."

It takes a few seconds for the implications of attention to sink in, but when Lane's eyes widen in understanding, so does Joan's smirk. Of course he wouldn't think of that. He's a man, for god's sake.

“Oh,” is all he says, tapping the red pencil in his right hand against the folder in front of him.

“Exactly,” she replies, and he huffs out a breath as if to say that isn't funny.

She's watching him now, and he must feel her eyes boring holes into his face, because he looks up at her again. Joan holds his gaze for a moment before glancing back to her wedding rings. Maybe he'll say something about his own marriage ending, and maybe he won't, but either way it's good for him to acknowledge that this is happening. It doesn't matter if he signs the papers today or thirty days from now. He’s still going to be divorced, no matter how much he tries to ignore that fact.

She can’t help asking one question. "Did you keep yours?"

Lane shifts in his chair, and puts his pencil aside. "No. I—erm, threw it out a window. Meant to be—punishment."

He doesn’t specify whether this gesture was supposed to punish him or punish his ex-wife for leaving.

"Ridiculous, I suppose."

She shakes her head no.

"It isn't."

After a moment, Joan reaches for her rings and slips them back on, twisting them around her finger in an anxious motion. In one quick movement, Lane reaches for the parcel, taking the manila envelope in one hand and slicing the flap open with a silver letter opener he produces from the middle drawer.

She keeps her hands in her lap, and says nothing.

He pulls out the small sheaf of papers, examining several paragraphs, and flips through the first few pages before finally reaching the last one. He places this document carefully on the desk. Several lines are tagged with neon-colored post-its, obviously awaiting signatures. She can even see his wife’s signature on the bottom of the page, bold calligraphy standing out among the blank space.

Lane picks up a fountain pen and signs his name in several places, the script slow and careful. When the last page is finished, he sets the pen into a nearby inkwell, and sits back in his chair, staring at the signed document with a distant, melancholy expression.

After a few seconds, he looks up, as if wanting her to say something.

Joan offers him what she hopes looks like a reassuring smile. She remembers the day she'd signed her own papers: it was mundane, almost dreary. After the pomp and circumstance of her wedding, as
small as that had been, she'd felt like there ought to be some sort of ceremony signaling the end of her marriage. In her case, it would have been a celebration, nothing funereal, but that's beside the point.

“Twenty years,” Lane whispers, maybe to himself. “Nearly half my life.”

He opens his mouth again, as if to continue this line of thought, then pauses, and speaks in a rush.

“Can we—keep on with the figures?”

She purses her mouth in a skeptical way. “You'll have to think about it eventually.”

He gives a jerky nod. “Yes, I realise that—just—for a little longer. Please.”

Joan sighs, and picks up her stenography pad, consulting her own spreadsheets.

“Item twenty two: Sugarberry Ham.”

Chapter End Notes

This is the chapter I was well and truly stuck on. I think the beginning sections got rewritten about three or four times before I was finally happy with the pacing and mood. Plus, it had been so long since we'd seen Joan at home that I felt it was important to get a glimpse of how tricky her balancing act has become. She usually puts the welfare/comfort of close friends or family over her own, and I think months of worry and caretaking would definitely have worn on her, even though it's something she chooses to do (and, you could argue, needs to do in order to feel like she's being a true friend.) Not to mention she's the one trying to keep up appearances.

I also thought it was important for Lane to have a chapter where you can see him start to quietly process the changes in his life. It's been six months since the suicide attempt, so there's time enough for him to have realized what's going to stay the same (almost nothing, except his re-establishing home and work routines) and what will need to be dealt with as he moves forward. Plus, he's starting to feel positive emotions like curiosity and sympathy, which will also help him engage with the world around him.
Chapter 12

A well-dressed gentleman in a grey suit exits a Mayfair shop with a small parcel in one hand: a leather-bound notebook, which he slips carefully into his overcoat pocket. It's warm for September; he can feel the perspiration building under his collar, at his waistline, and on his upper lip.

Just ahead on the pavement, outside a tailor's window, a woman in a pale blue dress and matching pillbox hat fusses briskly over her teenaged son, straightening the boy's shirt collar and jacket lapels until he shrugs away from her, clearly embarrassed.

“Mum! Get off!”

It's only once he gets closer that he finally recognizes the pair of them. His sister-in-law’s demeanor is as brisk and sharp as ever, and the boy's changed so much he’s practically a stranger. His ginger hair has softened into a straw color since the elder man saw him last, he's at least a foot taller, and generally seems to favor his father in several ways. Except for the eyes: they’re brown—with no specs.

He strides closer, holding up a hand to get their attention.

“Morning, all.”

Dear old Becky appears to recognize him immediately, judging by the twitch of her mouth, and the slight widening of her eyes, but her expression has smoothed over into something more placid by the time he’s standing next to them, and when she speaks, it's with a forcefully cheerful tone.

“Lewis. This is a surprise.”

He inclines his head in agreement. “I wasn't aware you were in town. Are you back on holiday?”

Rebecca waves a white-gloved hand through the air, as if the reason’s unimportant. “Nigel's outgrown his morning coat. We’ve just got another.”

Pointedly ignoring his question.

Lewis directs his attention to his nephew, casting his mind back for the correct age. It's been at least four years since he saw the boy last. He'd taken Lane and the family to dinner, just before they left for America. “Small wonder. You're—eleven, now?”

“What do you care?” grumbles the boy, staring down at the ground and grinding the toe of his shoe into the pavement.

“Nigel, don't be rude to your uncle.”

His mother casts a thin-lipped smile in Lewis' direction, as if the boy's only making some sort of joke.
“No bother,” Lewis lifts one shoulder in a shrug, amused. “I always hated when people would say the same to me.”

Rebecca waves her hand through the air again, as if doing so will physically erase her son's sullen behaviour.

“Nearly thirteen,” she says, as if this explains everything.

Lewis can’t help but smirk at the difference in personality. Lane at twelve was so quiet and unassuming he’d disappear inside the house for hours, or turn up on school grounds in some broom cupboard, with a writing pad and a couple of textbooks. So Nigel's got a bit of spirit to him. Good.

He feels the obvious question ought to be asked.

“Family well, otherwise?”

“Yes.” Her voice becomes terse, and her smile a bit forced. “I'm keeping very busy. Checking in on my parents, you know.”

The way she phrases her answer – as if the very question is offensive – strikes him as strange.

“I suppose Lane couldn't get the time to travel with you.”

Rebecca stares at him with narrowed eyes, as if she doesn't understand the question. She’s quiet for so long that Lewis reaches into his coat pocket for his silver cigarette case, in order to have something to do with his hands.

“No,” she says eventually, clearing her throat. “He isn't here.”

Nigel huffs out an aggravated breath, breaking the silence that follows her words with a scoff and a scornful expression.

“Christ. They got divorced.”

Lewis drops his unlit cigarette onto the pavement before he can put it to his lips. “I beg your pardon?”

“Nigel!”

Rebecca turns very pale, taking Nigel's arm in an iron grip.

The boy struggles out of her grasp. “Well, you did! And now you’re—”

“Stop it!” Rebecca hisses, and swats at her son's arm as if she's disciplining a much younger child, trying to grab his mouth and pinch it closed with her free hand.

The lad recoils, batting her hands away with a frustrated growl. Lewis is proud to hear the defiance in his voice.

“Why do you care if he knows? You're the one who left!”

Two people walking past cast them very brief alarmed looks, but hurry by with quick steps and downcast eyes, as if nothing interesting is happening.

Rebecca’s frozen in horror. Nigel slants a furious look toward his uncle, straightening the lapels of his jacket with an expression that says this is typical.
“We've been living with Granny and Granddad since February, Dad’s in New York, and now—”

“Go into the park and wait for me,” Rebecca points toward the square, her voice sharp and commanding. “Your grandmother shall hear about this!”

The boy lets his mouth fall open in outrage.

“You must be joking!”

“Nigel Alistair, do as I say!”

“All right!” the boy snaps. “Christ.”

He waves a languid hand in Lewis' general direction, shoulders slumping, as if he’s too exhausted to continue the argument. “Bye.”

They watch him amble across the road and into the square, plunking down onto the nearest iron-wrought bench and spreading his arms wide as he leans backward, looking up toward the sky. A couple of pigeons are pecking around on the stones in front of him, and he nudges one away with his shoe.

Lewis turns to his sister-in-law, finally able to voice his outrage.

“February?”

There wasn’t a phone call from Lane, or even a letter. How could they have divorced after…twenty years together? Christ, was the wedding really that long ago? Lane was so poorly on the day they all thought he might faint before the ceremony started. Lewis had to sneak him two shots of whiskey to ease the nerves, else Father would've come up with ideas of his own.

Rebecca's face betrays no ripple of emotion. Her eyes stay fixed on her son.

Lewis does not allow her silence to go unnoticed. “I understand you don’t want to talk about this in the middle of the street, but I shan’t be put off.” He rubs a hand across his eyes, trying to arrive at some solution to this problem. “There's a cafe round the corner. We—could take tea, if you’ve no other appointments.”

Her eyes slide over to meet his, and there’s no hiding the disgust in them.

“I suppose you'd like to hear all about it.”

Lewis refrains from reminding his sister-in—well, why he’s never liked her, but wants to remain in her graces long enough to find out what the hell’s happened.

You're the one who left!

Divorced. My god.

“He’s my brother,” Lewis says finally. “I ought to know.”

You owe him that much, you cat.

He hasn't spoken to Lane in months – not for any reason in particular, or because they’ve fallen out. They simply don’t keep up much. There’s usually a phone call at Christmas—but the man isn't Charles, for god's sake, nattering on to god knows whom about standards and success and keeping up appearances. Lane's a good sort—far more than that, if Lewis is being honest—and if he were
terribly unhappy in America he ought to have said something.

“Well, each to their own.” Rebecca loops her arm through her purse with a little scoff that says she’s going to hate every minute of their conversation. “I’ll put Nigel in a taxi before we go. Which way is it?”

“Toward the high street,” Lewis replies, indicating that he’ll wait for her here. As she crosses the street just behind a passing handsome cab, her heels tapping briskly against the white-painted crosswalk, he reaches for his cigarette case again, trying to steady his shaking hand.

**

Next door, through the shared wall, voices are getting louder and louder; Joan turns toward the noise with a noise of disgust.

“No—come on, man—” there’s a squeaking noise as furniture scrapes across the tile, which is followed by a squeal of laughter “—shit! Cut it out!”

Creative has been cutting up all morning. Joan knows there’s going to be some horseplay involved if they’re brainstorming with the freelancers on a food-related pitch, but it’s about to reach critical mass. One of them was actually trying to cook on the stovetop earlier. Joan’s sure it ended badly. She hasn’t seen the damage for herself yet, although she and Lane are in the middle of a tea break.

Lane takes another sip from his cup, and shoots a glare toward the shared wall. “Are they ever going to be quiet, or shall I just take a—pill in advance?”

His caustic remark makes Joan smile, although when she glances over at him, he just looks visibly annoyed. Over the past few weeks, he’s become more sarcastic than usual—not in a joking way, really, just commenting on all the idiotic things happening at work with a sharper tone, and with more pointed remarks. It felt odd, at first, but Joan’s started to think of them as jokes by now—they have a kind of dark humor to them which she can’t help but appreciate. It’s more like the kinds of dry jokes he used to make, anyway.

“You might as well,” she says, with a laugh and little shrug.

He sets his teacup aside, pulling a small bottle of aspirin from his desk drawer. Next door, there's more cursing, a loud yell, and suddenly a loud splat as a projectile hits the far right transom with such force Joan can almost see the glass vibrating with the resonance. She turns to stare at the affected window, letting out a curse of her own at the mess. A translucent red, viscous substance slowly oozes down the windowpane—it's stuck to the glass in small, jiggling clumps.

Dear god. It's Jell-O.

When she glances back at Lane, she notices he's staring at the window with wide eyes, his mouth hanging open in wordless shock. Determined not to let the misbehavior pass, Joan shoves her files onto the sofa and stands up, ready to storm into the hallway and give them all a piece of her mind. Who the hell do they think they are, kindergartners? This is an office, for god’s sake!

Before she can even move, the largest piece of Jello falls from the transom window with a vacuous sucking noise, making her stop in her tracks. It drops to the floor with a squelch, followed by a groan of horror, more laughter, and another male voice, one she doesn’t recognize.

“Ugh! It's down my shirt!”

An awkward silence lingers until someone else starts laughing. The noise gets louder and more high-
pitched by the second. It makes Joan’s blood boil until she whirls around to meet Lane’s eyes, and finally puts two and two together.

He’s hunched over in his seat with the contents of his teacup spilled across a file folder of expense reports, and giggling so hard that his face is bright red and water streams from his eyes.

Oh, my god.

She puts a hand over her mouth.

After all this time, after all the misery, he's actually happy about something. She doesn't know if he’s laughing at her, the antics next door, or something completely and wonderfully unrelated, but at this point, she doesn't care. Her skin prickles with goosebumps, and she feels lightheaded. Right now, it’s the most welcome sound in the world. How long has it been since he’s laughed at anything?

“Are—are you okay?” she can’t help asking, but just looking at him is making her start to laugh, too, in a helpless way. She sinks back onto the sofa cushions with weak legs. A few of her papers slide onto the floor.

He’s so hysterical he can’t even answer, gasping for breath – covering his face with both hands – and it just makes Joan laugh even harder to look at him, to hear his peals of laughter echoing around the little room like the toll of deep bells.

She can’t believe it. She just can’t believe it.

Oh, my god.

**

“Shit!” Ginsberg grabs another small trash bag, quickly stuffing two heaping plates of red Jell-O inside this, and glaring at Margie as he whirls around to make sure all the junk’s in the garbage. God, every time he thinks it’s all gone, there’s something else to pick up. “Did you lose an arm or something? Help me out, here!”

“No. You guys did this,” Margie says with a snort, taking her red pen out from behind her ear, and leaning backwards in the wooden chair to start correcting another mock-up. Her plain blue dress and jacket are spotless; she’d walked in after the chaos had died down. “You’re cleaning it up yourself.”

Ginsberg growls out a frustrated noise, and rakes a hand through his messy hair, sweeping a few more red-spattered papers into the trash. Jesus. It looks like they killed someone in here, like some godawful gangster movie.

There’s still laughing coming from Lane’s office—they’ve been in there giggling for half an hour—and it’s creeping him the hell out. Isn’t this how people have strokes? Lane’s got to be having a stroke. Ginsberg hasn’t even seen the guy crack a smile in weeks.

“Found the broom,” Stan says from the doorway, gripping it and a dustpan with a long handle in two fists, and trying to sweep up the mess with a few quick motions. “Jesus, this shit is sticky.”

He snickers at his own joke, then looks up to Ginsberg – who blinks back at him – as if to ask why they’re both so quiet. From the desk, Margie makes an amused noise, but doesn’t say anything.

Ginsberg hefts the trash onto a chair with a sigh, and looks up to see Joan standing in the hallway a couple feet behind Stan. She’s glancing inside the room with a raised eyebrow. Oh, god, she’s gonna yell at them—or even worse, she’ll get all teary-eyed again, and then he’ll feel like a real asshole.
They didn’t mean to get it all over the place. It got out of hand.

“Joan, don’t look at me like that!” he blurts, frowning at a white posterboard in one corner that still
has jello splattered all over it. “We’re disgusting—I know!”

One corner of her mouth quirks up after he says this, which, frankly, scares him beyond all reason.
Why the hell is she smiling like that? Is she gonna kill them?

“You’ll need to mop,” is all she says, her blue eyes flicking over the three of them. “And clean the
kitchen. I don’t want this tracked all over the office.”

Meeting Ginsberg’s eyes, Stan looks like he’s biting the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing,
but doesn’t say anything other than a casual:

“You got it, Joan.”

By lunchtime, Joan’s spent almost an hour in her own office, doing a little reorganizing with a drink
at her right hand and the radio playing in the background. As she leafs through a stack of papers and
brochures to be sorted, she notices a bright blue leaflet sticking out from the bottom of the pile.

When she tugs this out for examination, not recognizing it, the beautiful photograph takes her by
surprise—it’s a white sand beach flanked by thick palm trees, with a tanned woman relaxing on the
sand in the foreground, smiling at the camera. See all Hawaii! There are at least four or five other
leaflets stuck to this first one – advertising a luxury cruise to the Bahamas, a Caribbean resort, and
two more Hawaii brochures – all printed with the names of various airlines and travel agents.

She can’t help laughing at how long these have probably been buried in here. It’s been months since
she had time to think about anything other than work, let alone considered taking time off for a
luxury vacation.

The brochure from the Bahamas keeps catching her eye. In the colorful illustration, a little tow-
headed boy who can’t be more than four or five splashes in white-capped waves next to his young
mother and broad-chested father. Without letting herself think too much about this, Joan gathers up
the brochures, and sets them on top of her purse to take home. She forces herself to turn her attention
back to the papers on her desk. Don’t get too distracted.

It’s just an idea, that’s all. She’ll think about it.

A few days later, in the afternoon, Joan knocks on Lane’s door to tell him the time of next week’s
partners meeting. After a brief pause, she pokes her head inside the doorway to see if he’s busy. He’s
on the phone, and looks miserable about it, but when she mouths to him that she’ll come back later,
he shakes his head no, waving her inside with one hand.

She steps into the room, shutting the door behind her.

“Oh—no, it’s only—well, if you’ve got to run, I suppose you must. Did your mother need to—no,
that’s—fine. I’ll, erm, speak to you later.” A pause. He sighs. “Goodbye.”

When Lane replaces the receiver in its cradle, Joan can’t help studying his face. He looks very
melancholy. His lips are drawn into a pinched expression, and he’s blinking behind his glasses in a
way that makes Joan wonder what the rest of that phone call sounded like.
“Nigel?” she asks, and he nods once, letting out a long breath, and scrubbing at his eyes under his glasses.

Immediately, she crosses over to the bureau, and pours him a glass of water, taking this with her as she walks over to his desk and sets it next to his letter tray.

“You want to talk about it?”

She knows his relationship with his son has never been perfect – never been what he wanted it to be, if some of their previous discussions about the subject have been indicative of a trend – but since February, it’s been almost nonexistent. Joan doesn’t know what Rebecca knew or knows about Lane’s health in the meantime, but Nigel hardly ever calls, and Lane seems as if he just doesn’t know how to explain things to his son. Maybe he doesn’t want to say too much.

Joan can’t blame him for being circumspect. How the hell would you bring up the subject of attempted suicide without sending a kid off the rails? And how the hell are you supposed to have a meaningful conversation with your son without bringing up the most important part of the last few months?

“Not even ten minutes,” Lane sighs, waving one hand toward the telephone. “I just—don’t know what to say. He probably hates me.”

“I know it’s been hard,” Joan offers, leaning back against the lip of the desk, and letting out a long breath. “Although, for what it’s worth, I don’t think that he hates you. He’s probably just emotional about the divorce.”

Lane turns to look at her. She can see the anxiety in his face, and can’t help reaching out to touch his shoulder with one hand, briefly.

“We’ve—never been able to—talk about much,” he admits. “Not…properly, you know, and now…”

She knows. Sometimes she lies awake at night, listening to Kevin’s snuffling baby snores and wondering if what the hell she’s going to do in two years, or five, or ten, when he starts going to school and making his own friends and beginning his own little life. In an ideal world, she’d like to be able to come home and talk to him about all of these things – god, she’s even looking forward to it – and she’s honestly not sure how she’ll react the day he gets old enough to tell her she’s being too nosy.

Or, god forbid, maybe Kevin will just decide to talk to her mother about everything, and leave Joan completely out of the loop. She’s thought about that, too.

“What would you want to say to him?”

Lane shrugs.

“It’s—well, you understand he doesn’t—know about anything. The illness.” A pause. He lets out a scoff. “And if I knew what Rebecca had—said to him from the beginning, it would be easier, but we only speak through the lawyers.”

Jesus. Joan can’t help hating that woman for being so self-centered. God knows those two weren’t happy together, but if his ex-wife can’t even be bothered to pick up the phone where Nigel is concerned, then Joan thinks she’s lost her right to be upset about what Lane does or doesn’t talk about with their son.
Suddenly, she’s thankful that her own divorce went the way it did. Imagine having to involve Greg in every little parenting decision, and having to consider and strategize every move before she could make it, like a neverending chess game.

“Well, you already knew she was awful,” Joan says instead, noticing the way Lane raises his eyebrows at the word. He doesn’t contradict her. She pulls her hand away from his shoulder, suddenly feeling awkward. “You’re his father. Tell him whatever you want.”

There’s another knock at the door, and as it opens Joan glances over her shoulder to see Clara standing in the doorway, her mouth pursed in surprise.

“Oh—I’m sorry—I just need a signature for the expense report you gave Mr. Campbell. Should I come back?”

“No,” Lane says, blowing out a breath, and motioning for the secretary to come over. Joan notices the girl’s careful not to look at either of them as she waits for Lane to sign the form, which is a little strange, but Clara’s soon out of the room, closing the door behind her.

“Anyway,” Lane reaches for the water glass and taking a long drink. “Didn’t you stop in for something?”

Joan presses her lips together, feeling slightly awkward. She didn’t think he’d remember that.

“The partner’s meeting was set, but I actually wanted to discuss something other than work.”

“Well, don’t keep it to yourself on my account,” he says, leveling her with a stern look whose effect isn’t ruined by the brightness in his eyes. She flushes at the implication. He’s started to call her out for not being truthful with him when she thinks he’s having a bad day, which is a surprising development, but not misguided.

“You remember I mentioned my mother keeps nagging me about family time?” She lets out a sigh. “Since we’re finished drafting next year’s budget, and things are slowing down, I think—” she catches herself “—I’m going to take a vacation. In a few weeks.”

“Oh,” he says, eyes going wide. “Well. That’s—yes, of course you should.”

“I don’t even know where I’m going yet,” Joan says, offering him a small smile. “Any suggestions?”

A small smile comes to his face. “Somewhere warm.”

**

“Well,” Lewis examines his closed suitcase, now sitting at the foot of the door, with a satisfied expression. “I suppose that’s it, then.”

“Got your ticket and passport?” his roommate asks. Mark’s just this side of forty, and a head shorter than the other man, still as lithe and rangy as your typical sailor—looks much the same as he did twenty years ago. Today, the younger man’s out of stage clothes; he’s got his white collared shirt rolled up to the elbows, and bright red braces hanging past his waist, standing out against dark blue trousers.

Lewis taps the lapel of his grey jacket, indicating they’re in the inner pocket.

“And you’ve got some American money?”
“Took far too long. Exchange rate’s bloody murder.”

Mark eyes the suitcase on the floor with some suspicion, then turns back to Lewis. “Are you even taking a coat?”

Lewis can’t help laughing, gesturing toward the one hanging on the nearby rack. “You understand I’m not going to darkest Africa.”

The younger man feigns indifference. “Well, if you catch cold, I shall laugh.”

“You’re a very wicked creature,” Lewis sniffs. “Now, you’ll be rid of me for at least a fortnight. I’ve no idea when I’ll be back.”

“Give us a kiss, then.”

Mark holds his arms open with a smirk, and with a loud sigh, Lewis steps into them, leaning into an embrace that quickly turns much more heated than intended.

When Lewis finally pulls away from the kiss, wiping his mouth with the finger and thumb of one hand, Mark’s a bit breathless.

“Don’t get into trouble,” he warns, running a hand over the sides of his blonde hair to neaten it.

Lewis straightens the lapels of his jacket before he puts on his coat and stoops to pick up his suitcase, pretending not to hear this last comment.

“Ring you from the station.”

Mark opens the door, gesturing for Lewis to go.

**

They’re sitting in a town car in traffic on Marylebone Road: Nigel’s wearing his new suit, balancing a gleaming black hat on his pinstriped thighs and trying not to poke at his slicked-back hair, or knock the yellow boutonniere from his lapel. Mother’s seated in the row across from him, in a cream colored dress, a short coat, and a small hat with an even smaller veil, while Granny and Granddad are sitting to her right, wearing their usual morning dress. Granddad’s jacket is creased stiff from ironing, and the feathers on Granny’s wide-brimmed blue hat are so big one of them keeps brushing the roof of the car.

Mother checks the silver watch at her wrist with a sigh. “You’d think we should have missed the worst traffic.”

“Don’t trouble yourself, darling; you’ll bring on a headache.” Granny watches through the windows as the small crosswalk slowly empties and the signal changes. The car glides forward. “I telephoned Archer House myself, and was given to understand everything was in order for the breakfast.”

His mother sighs, pressing her pink lips into a line before answering. It’s so strange to see her wearing makeup. She hardly ever bothers with it. “Mamma, I’m—unconcerned about the breakfast. Mrs. Wyatt is very capable. I only meant that we ought not to keep Graham waiting—”

Granddad clears his throat, interrupting Mother mid-sentence.

“Now, my girl, I’ve told that boy he isn’t to lay a hand on you until—”

Nigel makes a face. Oh, Christ.
“For heaven’s sake, Richard,” Granny’s voice is as crisp as if he’s just made another remark about the fallen empire, or some other nonsense. “She’s a grown woman. You’re thinking of the other one.”

*The other one.* God, they won’t even say Dad’s name.

He glances over to Mother to see her reaction. Two spots of pink have appeared in her cheeks, but she tries to pretend everything’s fine. Her voice goes very cheerful as she gestures toward where Nigel’s sitting.

“Now, Papa—I wore Granny’s gown, for the first ceremony, and—and my hair was very long. You walked me down the aisle. Don’t you remember?”

Granddad looks across the car, following his daughter’s gaze, and frowns.

“That’s Nigel,” Mother prompts, smiling at her son with a slightly pained expression that says he ought to smile back. “You know him.”

Nigel stares back at them, feeling uncomfortable.

“Mm.” Granddad finally says, as if he does, and Mother’s obviously saying something very stupid, but his eyes have a blank look to them that Nigel doesn’t like. He quickly fixes his eyes away from the others and stares at the passing buildings out the window, instead.

After a few minutes, the car pulls to a stop just a few yards short of St. Marylebone’s Parish, and Nigel springs out as soon as Yates has opened the door, relieved to be away from everyone for a second.

There’s a white-bearded old man standing just outside the doors, wearing a morning coat and black trousers, standing tall with his feet spread apart a bit, and holding onto the head of a polished black walking stick with one hand. There’s a small bouquet of flowers held in his other hand, white and yellow.

“Is that—Grandfather Pryce?” Nigel asks, stunned, as Mother steps out of the car and onto the curb, just behind Granny. He watches as she tiptoes around a shallow puddle of water. Her beige high heels gleam against the dark pavement.

“My goodness,” Granny murmurs, but doesn’t even falter, just continues walking arm-in-arm with Granddad toward the church. He can hear her strike up conversation as they get within earshot of his other grandfather.

“Lovely weather this morning, isn’t it?”

“Indeed, madam.” Grandfather inclines his head as they walk past. “Pleasure to see you again, Brigadier.”

“Splendid, splendid,” Granddad replies, tipping his hat in greeting, and Nigel can see Mother breathe out a sigh of relief.

“Oh, how nice.” Mother smooths down one side of her coat, glancing toward Nigel, who gamely crooks his elbow and braces his right hand at his waist so she can take his arm. “I didn’t think he’d got my letter.”

**
The sound of an oven timer ringing jolts Lane out of his reverie.

In front of him, the television’s playing a rerun of the—erm, well—some sitcom. He’s got his journal open beside him, as well. He’d intended to write more than half a page before supper, but the words kept getting stalled. It’s been a strange few days.

Dr. Grant has stopped asking the very worst of the self-harm questions, which Lane only noticed just this week—and to top it all off, he thinks Lane’s finally used to the medications. Myra just smiles and keeps to their usual routes, asking him about the dosage and his levels of stress and forcing him to talk about his feelings—all very awkward, usually, but unavoidable by this point.

Joan keeps him steady during the day, managing the client side of finances and some of the day-to-day business. He’s—well, grateful for her help, and for her company. Some days, much as he might protest, it’s a relief to speak candidly to a friend about all this. She just…listens. Perhaps she’s tired of doing that by now, but she really ought to go on that vacation—when did she say it was, again?

He’s still worried that he’ll take a bad turn in the next few weeks. Every time another gloomy thought pops into his mind, he feels more anxious than ever. What if one wrong step sends him back to the brink?

In the kitchen, the oven timer continues to ring, long and shrill. After another minute spent dawdling, Lane forces himself to get up from the sofa. Last month, Myra had given him a yellow plastic box full of new recipes, and left it in the kitchen for him to look through. Tonight is the first night he’s actually tried to cook one of them. When he opens the oven door, surveying the casserole inside with resignation, he understands why. Bit burned around the edges.

As he’s putting the dish onto the counter, there’s a knock at the door. Lane sighs, tosses the potholders in his hands aside and makes his away across the room. He doesn’t even stop to reach for his walking stick on his way into the foyer, which makes him feel proud and then embarrassed in one fell swoop.

He forgets about all of these things the minute he opens the door and sees his elder brother standing on the other side.

“Little brother. You’re looking well.”

Lewis glances him up and down, briefly, before peering behind Lane at the rest of the flat, with clear curiosity. His grey suit’s a bit rumpled, and he’s got a clear five-o-clock shadow, but otherwise he looks the same as when Lane saw him the last time. Years ago—so long he can’t even remember the occasion.

Lane realises his mouth is hanging open, and quickly closes it. There’s a large suitcase at his brother’s feet – why on earth would he have – oh, god, he isn’t –

He forces himself to let go of the doorknob.

“What are you—doing here?”

Lewis smiles, reaching into his jacket pocket for his cigarette case.

“Haven’t you heard of a little thing called tourism?”

Lane just blinks back at his brother, horrified. Lewis isn’t – he’s not planning to stay, is he? Why on earth would the man arrive on his doorstep without so much as a warning? People don’t just show up to other people’s homes whenever they like! And why the hell should he want to come to New
York?

“Nightcap sounds lovely. Don’t mind if I do.” Lewis toys his cigarette through his fingers, and promptly sidles past Lane into the flat, leaving his suitcase behind in the drafty hall.

Lane’s left standing in the now-empty doorway, talking to the air.

“No, do come in, then, I’m not—busy at all.”

Lewis doesn’t even seem to hear this remark. From the kitchen, Lane can hear the rattling of cupboard doors being opened and shut.

“Now, where the devil do you keep your whiskey?”

Lane reaches down and grabs his brother’s suitcase with one hand, shoves it into the nearest corner, and closes the front door.

“Will you—there’s a system in place, if you’ll just—wait a moment!”

Chapter End Notes

Surprise! I always had Rebecca getting remarried fairly early in this story. With her father in declining health, and her mother an old-fashioned society type - “you’ve got to get remarried, you’ve got to secure your future” - it seems like Rebecca would be just young and pretty enough to rally quickly in her post-divorce period. In my head, her mother took her all over society and got her talking to some MP of roughly similar age, who’s super snotty but kind of perfect for her, position-wise (rich and sophisticated, can give her the life she wants, if not true love.) Plus, since Rebecca was never head-over-heels in love with Lane, I figure if she had a new opportunity she’d just analyze the risk and hedge her bets, not wanting to be some hapless divorcée living with her infirm parents.

Meanwhile, Lewis continues to be a complete goddamn nuisance, and his arrival in New York is going to blow the established routes to bits. Poor Lane is going to be dealing with that, next chapter.
Lane steps through the revolving doors and into the bright sunshine with a slight wince, bringing up a hand to shield his eyes as he walks past the front doors and toward the right hand corner of the building. Here, a red-haired woman in an aqua suit stands a few feet from the stone foundations, smoking a cigarette and staring out at the passing pedestrians along the street.

“You—saw my note, I suppose,” he said in greeting, and she turned to glance at him, a half-smile coming to her face.

“We really couldn’t have met at reception?”

He lets out a sigh. “I suppose we could have, only I had to slip away.”

Joan exhales smoke in a long breath, practically grinning now. “Can’t imagine why.”

Lewis has been here for nearly a week, and – so far – has made no mention of leaving. He’s tagged along to the agency too many mornings to count, and to lunch with Myra, as well, and when he’s not doing either of those things, he’s at home, making inane conversation, controlling the television channels, and telling Lane an array of horrible jokes.

“He’s not still staying with you, is he?”

Lane makes an unhappy noise. “Don’t remind me.”

Supposedly his brother’s got a room in some horrid hotel, but Lane has yet to see the man leave the flat in search of anything other than the nearest pub. And his suitcase keeps turning up in the oddest places—and there’s always food strewn all over the kitchen!

“Well,” Joan drops her cigarette onto the pavement, crushing it under the toe of her elegant black pump. “I’m sure he’s managing to distract himself.”

Lane groans again, briefly putting a hand to his eyes in a frustrated gesture. “Oh, god. Let’s just—walk before he finds out where we’ve got to.”

Two people: a young man and young woman, are standing nearly a foot away from Lewis, where he sits idly at the round table in the office lounge.

“Okay. There’s Italian, or Chinese—”

“Stanley,” says the little lesbian, wearing slim trousers, a colorful blouse, and a blazer, with her dark hair hanging down her back in a severe ponytail, “for the thousandth time: pick a place before I starve to death.”

“I thought you said you wanted sandwiches,” grumbles the coltish boy from his slumped position on
the sofa—Lewis always remembers him as a bit manic, skittish, even. “We said sandwiches.”

“If we’re not gonna pick a place, then I’m going to go talk to the new girl.”

“Not your type, I think,” Lewis says loudly, keeping his voice innocent.

The young woman glances toward him—he’s still thumbing through a worn copy of Advertising Age—and then back to her companions with a frown.

“Who the hell is this?”

“Lane’s brother,” Stanley says with a snort. “Don’t ask.”

Lewis extends a hand, but doesn’t get up. “Lewis Pryce.”

“Joyce Ramsay,” she says, squeezing his hand tightly as she shakes it.

God. The butch ones are always trying to prove themselves.

“Charmed.”

Her mouth purses in amusement the moment she lets go of his hand. Like recognizes like, he supposes, but she says nothing apart from:

“One of these days, she’s gonna warm up to me for real, and Stanley here is going to owe me fifteen dollars.”

“Oh. We said ten,” the scruffy man interjects, with good humor. “And she hates talking to you.”

“Please. I think I know how to read my audience.”

“Ah,” Lewis pulls a sympathetic face, “the little dyke’s upset because she can’t get noticed.”

The manic chap, who had been staring off into the distance, jerks his head round. An alarmed look crosses his features.

“Did you just—”

The young woman waves away her friend’s concern with a scoff. “We’re not across the pond, asshole. Queen doesn’t get the last word here.”

Lewis can’t help smiling. Got a bit of gumption to her, then. He admires that. “Well, I’m only being honest, dear. She’s never going to look twice at you.”

“God, you’re such a smug little—”

“Anyway,” her bearded friend interrupts, and lets out a long sigh, like he’s only been waiting for the conversation to lull. “We going to Moretti’s, or what?”

“Yeah. Get off your ass.” The young woman gestures toward the door.

Stanley indicates she should lead the way. “Come on.”

The three young ones begin to gather up their things.

“Wait,” the manic chap blurts, glancing toward the creative office. “Let me get my coat. It was raining before.”
“Jesus. Ginsberg, we’ll meet you at the elevator!” the bearded chap calls.

He begins to amble toward the main exit, mumbling something under his breath.

“Hey, Oscar Wilde.” The young woman turns to Lewis with an expectant look, “you coming, or what?”

Lewis blinks, but recovers quickly, straightening his jacket as he stands. “Well, I could do. If you’re quite certain.”

She makes a derisive noise. “Well, I passed Lane and Joan getting in the elevator on the way down. You’ve been ditched.”

**

Lane puts his key in his door, and gets it unlocked, opened, and fully closed behind him before realizing that his hallway is cluttered with things. There are three small cardboard boxes stacked on top of each other, sitting a few feet from the door.

“What on earth—?”

“Oh,” Lewis, dressed in trousers, a waistcoat, and a cuffed shirt, is carrying a small box into the foyer. What the hell has he got in there? “Hello.”

Lane tries to hang his coat on the rack and ends up accidentally dropping it onto the carpeted floor, along with his hat. “What are you doing?”

His brother sets the last box on top of the others, straightening up with a huff of breath. “You mentioned last night these were getting in the way. Thought it high time you were rid of the lot.”

“When did I—”

Lane glances back toward his briefcase, which is now lying on its side on the carpet, and then toward the nearest box, sitting a few feet in front of him. He takes a few steps forward, flipping up the flimsy top to reveal the contents: large, heavy round pieces wrapped in sheets of old newspaper. When he unwraps one of these, halfheartedly, the paper rips down one side to reveal part of a white china plate with a blue fleur-de-lis border.

Oh. The china. He doesn’t remember saying that the set was in the way or that he didn’t want it, but it’s just been sitting in the display cabinet in the sitting room for months, gathering dust. If Lewis wants to take the trouble to box it up, then that is—his affair. Better he stay occupied with some stupid project than to be bothering everyone else with other nonsense.

Lane clears his throat, somehow not wanting to think about the plates getting broken in storage, or thrown in the bin by some careless buyer. Becca had taken such pains with them over the years.

“You’re not just going to – what shall you do with them?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Lewis lets out a snort. “Send them back.”

Lane can’t even work up enough outrage to argue with this idea. There’s no use in it. Rebecca will likely find fault with the gesture, no matter if the entire set arrives on her doorstep without so much as a mark.

“Silver’s hers, too,” is all he says, letting out a sigh.
Lewis raises an eyebrow. “Well, well. You have got around.”

“No, it’s her grandmother’s. Wedding present, or something.”

It’s a miracle Lane remembers this, but in the early days, Rebecca reminded him of that particular fact every time they made so much as a cup of tea. *Careful, darling, please be careful.*

His brother holds out a large empty box toward Lane with only one hand. “Look here, if there’s anything else of hers still in your room – clothes or…woman’s things – put them in here, and I shall send those, too.”

“Ugh,” Lane winces at the phrase *woman’s things*. “Honestly.”

He doesn’t want to do any of that right now. All he can think about is getting his jacket and shoes off and perhaps having a lie-down.

“Little brother. Has your arm broken?”

Lane takes the proffered box from the other man with a huff of breath, deciding, as he walks down the carpeted hall, that he’s just going to keep to his room for the next few hours.

His bedroom is blessedly quiet, and with the door closed, it’s easy to pretend no-one else is in the flat. But it’s only after Lane’s sat down to remove his shoes and jacket, and is walking towards the bureau in search of a sleeveless jumper when he suddenly feels compelled to open one of the drawers on the left side – her side.

He can’t remember the last time he opened any of them – perhaps it was when she first went away, perhaps it was never – but curiosity is tugging at him again, insistent. You’ve got to know what she left behind. You’ve got to look.

Lane pulls open the top drawer – the smallest one. It’s completely empty. He thinks that may have been where she had all her jewelry.

Heartened by this fact, or perhaps a little disappointed, he reaches for the handle of the second drawer. It’s a proper size, and has a few small tokens inside – a couple of mismatched stockings and a small pile of thin handkerchiefs. Lane reaches inside, unfolds one of them; it’s a little lacy thing, impractical. He wonders why she wouldn’t have taken it; it’s so small.

Underneath this pile, the corner of an envelope peeks out from underneath a blue handkerchief – some little notion, Lane supposes. He actually remembers what these were meant for: scent to keep the clothes fresh, although he can’t smell anything perfumed at this point. Perhaps it’s gone off.

Lane reaches for the sachet, gripping the corner between his finger and thumb, but once he pulls it from the drawer and gets a good look at the face of the envelope, he realizes it’s not decorative at all.

It’s a letter.

**

Joan pushes open the door to Lane’s office only to find a man stretched out fast asleep on the sofa, his face and shoulders covered by an open newspaper. It crinkles faintly as he breathes, in and out.

She looks toward the desk. Lane sits in his usual chair, frowning at what must be his brother's sleeping figure, and meets her incredulous look with a sigh, holding up his pencil and aiming the eraser toward Lewis' head, like he's ready to hurl it across the room.
“Do you think it might work?” A smile plays around his lips. Joan shuts the door carefully and goes to sit down opposite Lane’s desk, setting her pile of work in her lap and pushing a single thick folder in his direction.

“Use this. It'll fly through that newspaper.”

Lane chuckles, as if he’s imagining the result, but when he flips open the folder Joan’s handed him, he studies the quarterly statement for several seconds before looking up with a sigh.

“I don't much feel like going through these, to be honest.”

Joan snorts out an amused noise, knowing exactly what he means. Quarter two is usually quiet at first, and there's nothing exciting in this writeup. Gains and losses are holding steady, not to mention that they haven't picked up a new client in three weeks. It’s a dry spell—probably the longest in two years.

“Well, if we're playing hooky, where do you want to start?”

Lane makes a noise that indicates he’s thinking, and flips the folder shut. After a moment, he looks appraisingly at the drink tray, then back to Joan. “Care for one?”

“At twelve-thirty?” She glances at her watch, and pretends to disapprove, but in response to his disappointed expression, which plainly says *spoilsport*, she lets herself smile. “Maybe a little gin.”

He grins, gets to his feet, and moves to pour the drinks, taking out two glasses and putting in two ice cubes, then uncapping the nearest bottle and pouring a small measure of liquor into each. When he returns, he sets Joan's drink across from her, then sits down, taking a sip of his own drink and putting his glass aside.

“What have you been up to this morning?”

One corner of her mouth quirks up into a smile. “Ken roped me into a client dinner with Ed Baxter, three weeks from now. You’re welcome to join us.”

Lane pulls a face that practically screams *no*. Joan laughs again.

“A multi-million dollar company, and Ken’s worried about the cost of one campaign. He doesn’t want to ruffle his father-in-law too much, so it falls to me. I’ve already drawn up a provisional budget.”

“Which one is Baxter?”

“His father-in-law. Leather-bound.” Joan takes a drink, gesturing to her face with her free palm. “You know, orange?”

It takes a second for him to get that, but once it lands, he grins. “Ah.”

They chat comfortably for a little while. Joan shares a few stories about Kevin, who’s talking up a storm and running her mother ragged, but it’s not until Lane gulps down the rest of his drink that he admits why he must have been so eager to talk about something other than work.

“Have I—mentioned this new business with Rebecca?”

Joan takes another sip of her drink. Oh, god. “She didn't call you, did she?”

Lane's eyes widen. “No, nothing like that. Only—” he’s speaking very slowly “—to be honest,
when she went away, she left some of her things in the flat. I, erm, never got round to rearranging.”

She raises her eyebrows. “I’m surprised you didn’t throw them out.”

Lane gives her a mildly disappointed look over the top of his glasses, which just makes Joan smirk.

“Greg used to have a baseball card collection. I sent it down the trash chute the day we separated.”

When he speaks, he sounds a little tickled by that fact. “Well, I wasn’t going to go that route, but someone,” he inclines his head behind her, toward the sleeping form of his brother, “decided to make the lot a kind of, erm, pet project. Keeps saying we ought to send it back.”

“We're not talking about furniture, are we?” Joan traces over the rim of her glass with one finger in an idle gesture. “What did she leave?”

He shakes his head.


Lifting one hand in a shrug as if to say I don't know what to do about that.

Joan takes another gulp of her drink.

“She also—there was something I found.” Lane stares down at the top of his desk as he says it. “Not meant for me, but it was—well, I'll just show you.”

He reaches inside his jacket pocket and produces a letter whose envelope is ripped at the top right corner, thin and stained with wear, as if it's been handled often. It looks ancient, though it can't be more than thirty years old. Lane turns it over in his hands for a moment before pushing it across the desk.

“It's from the war.”

As if this explains everything. Joan looks over the face of the small, worn envelope. The address and name – Miss Rebecca Winters – are scrawled in a thin, slanted black script she doesn’t recognize, and the envelope is covered with faded postal marks. Royal Mail.

It looks like it's from a soldier – probably a love letter. Joan glances back at Lane, trying not to sound as curious as she feels. “Did you read it?”

He nods, and she picks up the envelope, taking his yes as tacit permission to open it. Her fingers are rough against the delicate paper as she carefully unfolds the letter, and clears her throat, reading aloud at first.

“My dearest darling: as I sit here tonight I am thinking of you so terribly much.” She snorts out an amused noise. It's a little cheesy. ‘The desert is just rotten. Sand everywhere. Let's get back to the old days, darling, soon as this war is over – ”

She reads a little further, silently, and gets as far as I want nothing more than to see you again. I want to be in the back garden, I want to hear your lovely sighs before setting it back onto Lane’s desk with another little huff of amusement. Soldiers are all the same.

“Nineteen forty-one,” he says first, gruffly.

Joan’s not sure what he’s trying to point out. That would be years before he and Rebecca met, at
least—she remembers that much. “Were they engaged?”

Lane rubs a hand over the back of his head, putting the letter back into his jacket pocket. “I honestly don't know. Poor chap never came back, far as I'm aware.” He sighs loudly, now fiddling with a pencil on his desk. “What do you think?”

Joan almost chokes on the last gulp of her gin.

“What exactly are you asking, she wants to say, but decides to phrase it another way. “What bothers you most about it? Besides the fact that she kept it?”

An audible snore sounds from behind her, in the sofa’s direction. Lane rolls his eyes, but seems as if he's trying to ignore the interruption, and after a long pause, he finally speaks. His voice is quiet.

“The night she, erm, left, she told me I never knew—what she wanted.”

Oh, god, that’s awful. Joan wants to say a few choice words, but forces herself to stay quiet. She shouldn’t interrupt his train of thought.

“I don't know. I suppose—well, now I—wonder why she accepted me at all.”

There are other questions wrapped around this admission, truths he might not want to discuss – did she love me at all, did she even like me – but there’s only one question that Joan feels she can ask without being too prurient.

“Do you regret marrying her?”

He stares at her, clearly stunned. She shrugs, offering a rationalization.

“‘I was miserable with Greg, but if it weren't for that relationship, I wouldn't have Kevin. I wouldn’t be here. I might not have any of this.”

Her admission seems to make Lane thoughtful. He considers her question for a long few seconds before speaking again.

“We both wanted Nigel. Or, well, children, you know.” He gives her a significant look that she can’t quite parse. Maybe they had trouble conceiving? “I think that’s why she—stayed so long. Thought he’d be, erm, better off, I suppose.”

Joan understands that rationale. If Kevin had been old enough to be attached to Greg, or if Greg hadn’t been a completely selfish bastard, she would probably have tried harder, too, before kicking him out. She would have tried everything. She did try everything.

“Had you separated before?” she asks, keeping her voice careful. “I thought things were up and down for a long time.”

Lane’s brow draws into a frown. “Oh. Erm, yes—can’t recall when, exactly, but I think it was several months, or a year, or something. She went back over.”

“I didn’t know that,” is all Joan says, her mind whirling with more questions. How long were you separated? Why didn’t you get divorced then? What made you get back together? Did you even want to? “I’m just surprised you got back together.”

“Well,” Lane sighs after a moment, but stops, looking apologetic. “Sorry. Not exactly the
conversation you wanted, I dare say.”

Joan offers him a smile, and tries to be more reassuring. She’s glad he feels like he can confide in her. Honestly, she welcomes it. It feels normal.

“Don’t apologize,” she tells him, shaking her head. “If things between the two of you were that bleak, then she did you a favor by ending it, because you wouldn’t have.”

She glances from Lane's surprised expression to her empty glass, realizing how sharp this must sound, and not wanting him to feel insulted. She isn't trying to be ugly. “All I’m saying is that you deserve to be with someone who really appreciates you, and now, with the divorce, you have the opportunity.”

As she’s speaking, she realizes she didn’t even bother to ask if he was interested in dating people again, and quickly amends her sentence, just in case. Maybe he’s not ready to be set up. Maybe he’d rather get used to being a bachelor first, keep getting his head together.

“If that’s something you want.”

Lane's obviously flustered by her comment, mouth slightly open as if he doesn't know what to say. He's trying not to stare at her, which isn’t working very well. She clears her throat again to break the awkward silence, gesturing to his glass.

“Need a refill?”

She probably shouldn't have one, given that she's getting sentimental, but stretching her legs seems like a good idea. She’s a little warm, as well. The air conditioning is turned down low, and without a breeze, it’s become almost stifling.

“I—think I will do. If you don’t mind.”

“I’ll even pour this time.” Joan collects the glasses, and walks quickly to the credenza. Before she even grabs for the bottle, her eye catches the silver pitcher of Lane's tea service sitting to her left, within arm's reach. A mischievous idea sparks to mind.

Calmly, she picks up the teapot's lid with two fingers, turns to get Lane's attention, and inclines her head toward the still-sleeping Lewis. Lane meets her eyes, plainly amused, and she puts one finger to her lips, miming that she’s about to let the lid drop. He nods for her to go ahead, and puts a hand up to one ear.

The lid drops to the tile with an ear-splitting crash.

On the sofa, Lewis bolts upright, arms flailing, the paper still covering his face as he blurs, “Jesus bloody Christ!”

Turning quickly around, and pretending to be busy with the drinks, Joan shoots Lane a sly look, biting the inside of her cheek to keep a straight face. He’s covering his mouth to hide the fact that he’s laughing, but when he speaks he tries to pretend nothing's happened.

“Did that—wake you?”

He’s giggling so much he can barely choke out the words, but she’s glad he enjoyed their little prank. God knows they never get to have a little fun at someone else’s expense. Joan bends down, picks up the lid from the ground, and replaces it on the top of the teapot.
“Sorry,” she says lightly.

Lewis throws the newspaper pages aside with a crinkling noise, and gets to his feet with a growl, rubbing at his eyes with the palms of both hands.

The door clicks closed behind him as he leaves.

Lane laughs even harder, then, and tips one hand to Joan in a silent well done.

She inclines her head in a pretend bow – you’re welcome – before taking the refreshed drinks back over to his desk.

**

“What are you staring at?” one of the secretaries asks, which causes Lewis to look up from the cuff of his left shirtsleeve. He’s still standing just outside Lane’s closed door, trying to process what he’s just overheard.

Lane held nothing back from her—and she encouraged him.

“Loose button, I’m afraid,” he answers, clearing his throat and giving the girl a sly smile, which feels forced around the eyes. “Shirt may be a bit younger than you. But not by much.”

The brunette giggles, waving one hand in a dismissive gesture. “I doubt it.”

Lewis turns his attention back to his shirtsleeve, absently rubbing the side of his right thumb against the top button at his left wrist. It isn’t loose at all. Mark sewed the thing himself, ages ago, and pronounced it very sturdy. But Lewis is still shell-shocked by the conversation he’d just overheard—they’re in love, the pair of them, can they not see it?—and so on a whim, deciding this will further his ends, he reaches toward the secretary’s desk, grabs the handle of a pair of metal scissors sticking out from her standing pencil box, and snips the “loose” button clean off.

It falls to the floor and rolls against the heel of his shoe.

“Oh, my god, you didn’t need to do that!” the girl cries, looking horrified at his impulsiveness. “Caroline has thread in her desk; she could have fixed it.”

His retort is automatic, but lacks heart. “She’s likely too busy to deal with an old man like me.”

Caroline: older, he thinks, brunette, slightly dowdy. Perhaps she’ll have a bit of useful information. Battle-axes always know the stories of the old wars. She must know something about Joan, at least.

You deserve someone who appreciates you.

Was Joan telling Lane to make a play for her affections—that she could appreciate him better than Rebecca ever had? She told me I never knew what she wanted. Christ, if Lewis ever sees the hellcat again, he shall give the woman a piece of his mind.

“Oh, no, she wouldn’t mind. Mr. Sterling’s never in.”

Hm. A bored secretary tends to be a talkative one, especially if they’re the helpful type. “You wouldn’t mind taking me over to her, would you? Only I’ve still got everyone mixed up.”

Lewis smiles again at the young girl, very conscious of the way she preens under a bit of courtesy flirting. None of the other executives must bother paying attention to her.
“Oh, of course.” She quickly puts her typing pages aside. “It’s no problem at all. Come right this way.”

**

Fifteen minutes later, he sits in an extra chair, just behind Caroline’s desk, with his left arm extended over the tabletop, palm up, and her hands balancing against the sides of his wrist as she sews.

“Thread on this button-hole’s coming loose, which is probably what did it. We might have to roll your cuff back if you want that fixed.”

“You’re a dab hand, my darling,” Lewis pronounces as he watches her handiwork. Neat, tidy stitches have secured the end of the loose bit of thread as she continues to work. “Many thanks for tidying an old man up.”

The secretary just laughs, in a short nasal burst. “In this place, you’ve gotta be prepared. I even have a tourniquet in my desk.”

Hm. He supposes they’d need a few first-aid items, just in case.

“Well played.”

As conversation lapses, Lewis turns to examine a few of the personal items on her desk. There’s two pictures: one of her and a stout balding chap – husband, he guesses – and one of a group of three young people all together by a sitting room window: her children, probably, judging by the look of the two girls. Possibly taken during a holiday, as one of them’s wearing a red party gown.

“How old are your children?” he asks, inclining his head toward the group picture, which is nearest his eye line. “Handsome bunch.”

“Oh, thank you. Well,” Caroline adjusts one side of his left shirtsleeve as she talks, “Ritchie’s my oldest, and he’ll be…thirty eight this year. Then there’s Millie, and my youngest, Patricia. She’s thirty two.” She smiles again. “I probably shouldn’t brag about their ages, huh?”

“Oh, I shouldn’t worry,” Lewis assures her. “All married with children of their own, I suppose?”

“Mm hm,” Caroline says. “Eight grandkids, altogether.”

“Blimey.” Lewis pulls a face. The prospect of so many brats sounds ghastly. The husbands must be on the wives constantly, poor girls.

“Are you married?” Caroline asks after a second, and the hesitation on her face would be funny if it wasn’t so earnest. “I noticed you don’t wear a ring.”

“Lifelong bachelor,” he replies with a smirk. “More fun that way.”

She frowns in a surprised way, as if she doesn’t know how to react to such a pronouncement, but doesn’t comment other than to say:

“Well, I hope you’re not out there breaking poor girls’ hearts.”

“Never,” Lewis says, with a little wink, and the secretary laughs.

A brief silence falls across the table, broken only by the distant bustle of chatter and typing and activity from the desks down the hall.
“You’re a little alike. You and Lane.”

Lewis raises an eyebrow, interested to hear what she means by this. He and Lane have always been like night and day as far as personalities were concerned.

“I mean, I didn’t know he had a brother,” she continues. “And you’re more outgoing. But I can see the resemblance.”

He snorts out an amused noise. “You certainly see more than most.”

“Well, believe me, we’re just glad he’s all right, after everything that happened. Heart attacks are serious.”

“Mm.” Lewis fights to keep his face impassive, and his voice light.

“Lane was—poorly,” Rebecca smoothed her gloved hands over the clean napkin in her lap, for what must have been the third time in five minutes. She had barely even touched her tea. The slightest smudge of nude lipstick grazed the rim of her cup. “That’s all.”

“Define poorly,” Lewis said flatly.

Her dark eyes met his, and then flicked away toward the other end of the café, as if she wanted to roll her eyes. “Exhaustion, I suppose. All he cared about was the business. What more could you possibly want to hear?”

That you loved him, Lewis thought sourly. That you were worried.

“So, I suppose you stopped speculating the moment you boarded the plane?”

Her mouth thinned.

“Well, he brought it on himself. He worked too much.” She removed her napkin from her lap, dabbed gingerly at one corner of her mouth, and then set it into a neat pile next to her silverware. “You must excuse me. I’ve another appointment.”

“Wait—”

“I’m afraid I’m very busy—”

“—sick leave?”

Lewis realizes he has no idea what the secretary’s just said.

“Sorry. What?”

Caroline stares at him as if he’s misheard the question. “I was just asking, did you get to visit? When he was in the hospital?”

“Oh,” Lewis plays this question off with the easiest excuse in the world. “Hard to get the time off, you know, not unless someone’s taken a real turn.”

She looks sympathetic. “I’m surprised Lane’s doctors didn’t ask you to come. The partners were worried.”

He feels his stomach drop with the implications, and clears his throat to mask the sudden tightness in his voice.
“Yes, well. They said everyone here had things well in hand.” Lewis pauses, wonders if he dares to ask the bold question. “He and Mrs. Harris seem to get along.”

Caroline’s smile lights up her face for half a second before she tempers it.

“Sorry to interrupt,” comes a third voice. Lewis looks over to see a young black secretary standing in front of Caroline’s desk. She’s pretty; with short hair and striking eyes, but her long plaid skirt, drab jacket, and muted blouse do nothing to compliment her figure, if she’s even got one under all that. Her eyes keep flicking towards in him in a way that suggests she heard what he’d said, and knows what he’s doing. She’s holding a few envelopes in one of her hands, which she quickly places into the older woman’s mail tray.

“These just came for Mr. Sterling.”

Solicitor’s bills, judging by the return address. Caroline does not seem fazed.

“Oh, thanks, honey.”

The young girl gives them a polite smile before she walks back to her desk. Her sensible heels barely make any noise at all.

“Well,” Caroline says, snipping off the last thread with a pair of small scissors, and releasing his arm from her grasp. “That should just about do it.”

Lewis flexes his wrist, experimentally, then rolls the sleeve cuff back into place. He forces cheer into his voice, although the end of the sewing means their time together has just been cut short. “Thank you for all your help.”

**

“Mr. Pryce?” came the call from the buzzer on Lane’s desk. “Mrs. Harris is here to see you.”

Lewis puts his magazine aside, and looks around the empty office, as if a second person is going to catch his eye and laugh at how this slip-up must have happened. After a moment, he gets to his feet with a bemused snort, walks over to his brother’s desk, and pushes the flashing button, which he assumes will answer the summons.

“I’m afraid my brother’s gone to lunch, dear girl—”

The door to the hall opens anyway, and here is Mrs. Harris, striding in slowly but purposefully, if Lewis is reading her correctly.

“No, she means you!” the secretary says brightly, from the hallway.

“Well, well,” Lewis spreads his hands in surrender, very intrigued, and watches as the woman in question closes the door behind her. “Mrs. Harris. What an unexpected pleasure.”

“I thought I might drop by and say hello,” she tells him first. There’s an insouciant quality to her voice as she speaks; that low purr, combined with the way her hips sway as she walks toward him, makes Lewis certain this has worked with stupider men. Or perhaps it’s just her way of assuming friendliness, that girls-gossiping tone he knows well from his years in the theatre. Either way, it’s something she plays to her advantage. He can’t help admiring the woman for knowing her own strengths.

“Now, that act may charm plenty of others,” Lewis can’t help smirking as he talks, “but not me, I’m
afraid. You’ve come calling for a reason.”

For a moment, he can see her practiced smile widen into something more genuine, but the private amusement is gone in seconds. When she looks at him again, it’s without the film of that coquettish charm. Her eyes are clear and keen. She’s sizing him up.

“Well, if you’re incorruptible,” she draws out the word, either because she finds the idea funny or because she’s guessed at the truth, “you won’t mind if I stay.”

Lewis gestures toward the sofa, taking out his cigarette case. “By all means.”

She walks toward the sitting area but does not sit down, exactly, simply turns to face him as he’s walking closer, her hands folded in front of her skirt.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Her eyes follow his movements as he plucks a cigarette from the silver case. He almost laughs at her expectant look. Most of the young girls don’t demand this kind of attention from him. They prefer to light their own, these days.

He offers her the open case. She picks out a cigarette from the middle, puts it to her lips, and allows him to light it.

They sit down. Lewis perches on the far end of the sofa nearest the shared wall, with Mrs. Harris in the green chair nearest the doorway.

She taps her cigarette into the nearest ashtray, by her right hand, clearly waiting for him to break the silence.

He crosses one leg over the other, leaning back into the sofa cushions and watching her as she sits across from him, smoking idly.

“You aren’t at all what I expected, you know.”

A lift up of her chin, forward, aggressive. “What were you expecting?”

“Do you often interrogate strangers?”

“Why? Are you always this coy?”

“Mrs. Harris.” It’s an amused chastisement. “I’ve much better things to do than play the coquette.”

Her voice is all innocence. “I thought lifelong bachelors were good at that.”

Lewis does not miss the raised eyebrow that accompanies this remark, or the way her mouth twitches up in brief satisfaction. Oh, she is pleased with herself. Even Lane’s not been brave enough to pursue this line of conversation.

“Not as a herd,” he responds, which makes her huff out a breath through her nose. So, she’s a woman of the world—observant, has manners, but isn’t afraid to ask the impolite questions.

“Are you in love with my brother?” he asks.

Her eyes widen for a fraction of a second before she’s able to control herself. “Excuse me?”

The other man raises two eyebrows, pleased to have caught this much. “It’s a perfectly reasonable question.”
“Why are you here?” she asks flatly. He’s got under her skin with that one. Her voice has lost its once playful edge.

Lewis’s eyes flick toward the desk, and land on the battered abacus to the left of the desk lamp. Perhaps the woman will be more forthcoming if he talks first.

“Last month, I saw Rebecca and Nigel in London, and the only piece of information she gave me regarding Lane was that he’d been unwell. She called it exhaustion.”

Mrs. Harris opens and then closes her mouth, pressing her lips together as if to keep from saying something she’ll regret.

The older man inclines his head in confirmation.

“You may imagine my confusion,” he continues, “when I heard one of your secretaries reference the cause of his leave as a heart attack.”

He produces the silver cigarette case from his jacket pocket again, turning it over in his hands for a moment before meeting her eyes.

“Of course, Lane's wife—”

“Ex-wife,” she corrects immediately.

Lewis clears his throat. “My apologies. I was going to say she may have her stories crossed.”

“She left.” The woman bites off each word. “Anything she's told you is irrelevant.”

“Joan,” the other man begins, and at her sharp look, immediately backpedals, “Mrs. Harris. If Lane was unwell, and he is divorced, something has gone very wrong. Now, it doesn’t matter what Rebecca said. Frankly, Nigel was the one who brought it up. He was adamant I hear the truth.”

“So you just flew over here, expecting other people to fill you in? I know what you’ve been doing.”

He raises an eyebrow at her vehemence, but ignores the bait. “You have the entire story – the true story – at your disposal. All I’m asking is for you to tell me.”

Joan exhales out a jet of smoke. Her cigarette dangles between two fingers.

“No.”

A clump of ash drops onto the floor, but she doesn’t seem to notice. Her refusal actually takes him by surprise. “What.”

“No,” she repeats, and puts her cigarette aside for a moment. “I’m not telling you a damn thing.”

Lewis can’t help it—he starts laughing.

“That’s funny to you?” Her hands are shaking, although her words are steady with suppressed anger.

“Evidently.” He lifts one hand in a careless gesture, and decides to try again. “It’s a word I don’t hear often, to be perfectly honest. You know, I really do—”

“He doesn’t trust you,” she interrupts, then mimicks his nonchalant tone. “To be perfectly honest.”
Lewis stops laughing. His voice turns silken. “While it is touching to know Lane’s got a sort of—champion—you don’t get to determine what I’m able to hear about members of my own family.”

“Because you’ve been so devoted to him lately?”

He feels a spike of anger in his chest. “You have no idea what you’re—”

She talks over him, voice becoming high-pitched. “Feel free to keep pretending you have Lane’s best interests at heart, but nothing you say can change the fact that when he needed you most, you weren’t here. I don’t care how far you’ve traveled. I don’t care that he’s your brother. You don’t deserve anything. You’re nobody.”

She reaches to her right, stubs out her cigarette with such force that the ashtray slides several inches across the tabletop, and rises to her feet.

“You want him to need you,” Lewis watches the woman stare at him as he says the words, “don’t you?”

A faint tinge of pink appears in her cheeks, but she stands her ground, and meets his eyes with a glare so fierce it’s as if she’s waiting for him to leap up and strike her. Go on, then, her thunderous expression says. I dare you.

“At least I don’t have to worry he’ll forget me.” Her eyes narrow almost imperceptibly after she says this, as if she’s given something away, but just as he notices the shift, it becomes guarded again—unreadable.

“Well, it’s selfishness either way, dear girl,” Lewis says lightly, breaking the established pattern in an attempt to keep himself calm. He forces himself not to clench his jaw—to remain unruffled. “I do hope that doesn’t bother you. I’m sure you have the clearest of intentions.”

She throws him a look of pure disgust. “Grow up.”

And with that, she strides to the door, opens it calmly, and leaves him alone in the room. From the hallway, he can hear Lane’s secretary rustling through papers at her desk, the swish-swish-swish noise echoing around and around in his ears.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long wait between updates! It's been a rough couple of months.

After reading this chapter, my beta described Lewis as "chaotic-neutral," which is just perfect and fits my inner picture of him to a T. In if inconvenient, the brothers are somewhat united from the start as far as goals/interactions/expectations go, but here, they start on completely opposite ends, and continue to be terrible at communicating with each other. It'll come up again later.

Meanwhile, Joan is nearly ready to be go on her long-delayed vacation...
The air is stifling today, more like summer than early autumn, and the breeze stirred up by the traffic only serves to remind Lewis how much he misses the drizzly fog of London. Not least because Lane is very grouchy today.

“No, I don’t want to go somewhere new for lunch—”

“Oh, honestly, Lane,” Lewis straightens his jacket as they get in range of the soda shop doors. A queue has formed on the pavement, causing passerby to push past it in frustration. “It’s three blocks from your office, not the bloody East Side—”

“They give you too many chips—it’s impossible to eat them all—”

“I thought you said you had never been here before.”

His brother looks furious at being contradicted. “Well, I haven’t!”

As they join the queue that stretches several feet past the doorway, Lane suddenly stops walking, and makes a shushing noise that causes Lewis to turn and stare at his brother with puzzled eyes.

“Why on earth are you—?”

Lane’s gaze is fixed on the front doors, his voice quiet. “No, don’t!”

Lewis glances over just in time to see two petite young women emerging onto the pavement. One of them – blonde, bit plump, round-faced – holds the door open for her friend, and has got a bag of sandwiches in her hand, as if they’re out picking up for three or four others, while the second girl – dark-skinned, svelte, in a bright pop of green – follows as she places her wallet back into her handbag.

Lane is clearly trying to remain unseen, practically hiding behind Lewis’s jacket, but he keeps glancing sideways at the women as if he must see where they’re going. Is he looking at the blonde girl? Is it someone who once worked at the agency, perhaps a secretary? How else could he be so familiar with someone her age?

The blonde woman doesn’t seem to know his brother from Adam, and doesn’t even glance at two of them as she walks past, but when the Negro girl notices Lane, she stops short, staring at him in clear surprise. Lewis knows that look intimately: equal parts curiosity and horror.

Good god. They must have been lovers.

Quickly composing her expression, and noticing Lewis’s raised eyebrow, she stands taller, raises her chin, and walks up to them with a determined air.

“Hello,” she says, barely sparing Lewis a glance in favor of Lane. Her voice is low—the practiced kind of smooth. “I didn’t recognize you at first.”
Lane’s turning pink, but at least he’s able to look her in the face when he speaks to her. “Oh. Well, yes, erm, I suppose I could say the same.”

There is a very long pause.

“How have you been?” asks the woman, biting her lip briefly.

“Fine.” Lane doesn’t seem to know what to do with his hands, first jamming them into his pockets, then pulling them out and crossing them over his middle. He does look away from her now, seeming very embarrassed. “And—youself?”

“Good.”

A not-insignificant diamond flashes bright on the woman’s left hand as she nudges a stray curl away from her eyes. Lewis isn’t even sure if Lane’s noticed this particular detail, given the way he’s just barely managing to make conversation.

“Hello,” he interrupts, deciding not to prolong an awkward moment. “Lane’s brother, Lewis.”

“More family,” says the woman with a huff of breath not quite like a laugh. They shake hands; her grip is half-hearted, as if she’s already preparing to flee.

What a strange thing to say. “Who did you—?”

“Sorry,” Lane interrupts, shaking his head. “He’s—you don’t have to—”

“No, it’s all right.” The young woman holds up one hand as if he needn’t bother finishing the sentence, her voice turning brisk. A few paces to the right, her blonde friend is still waiting for her, pink lips pursed in amusement as she watches this little scene unfold. “Anyway. I should go. It was nice to see you.”

“Oh, well, erm—goodbye.”

Lane looks utterly defeated as the woman walks away.

“I told you I didn’t want to eat here,” he finally says, and shuffles out of the queue and in the opposite direction, toward the curb, where several yellow cabs sit waiting for fares.

*Oh, for god’s sake.* Lewis is already fast on his brother’s heels, forcing himself not to roll his eyes at this particular lamentation. “What did she mean, more family?”

**

“Lane, you can hardly avoid the subject forever!”

The door slams shut behind Lewis as they enter the flat; Lane doesn’t even bother to put his keys in his pocket or to turn around, walking so quickly he’s still carrying his walking stick like a bloody baton. He tosses this aside with a huff of breath, letting it roll over the carpet as he moves down the hallway.

“Stop pestering me, damn it!”

“I shall pester you all I like. You’re being deliberately obtuse,” Lewis growls. His footsteps follow Lane down the long hall, making Lane grit his teeth together in frustration. “Did she meet Rebecca? Or Nigel?”
“No, she bloody well didn’t meet Rebecca, and I think you know that!”

“Why should she have met anyone else in our family? How on earth could—”

“The reason does not matter,” Lane snaps, finally turning around, and fixing Lewis with as good a glare as he can manage, “because it never—” He bites down on his tongue, refusing to let himself finish the sentence. *It never should have happened.*

“Little brother. Whom, precisely, from our family did she meet?” Lewis matches his brother’s tone, and takes a step forward, his eyes searching Lane’s with an unnerving intensity.

Lane glances right, so briefly it’s only for a second, but somehow his brother can see an answer in this glance, a flash of surprise gracing his features.

“My god,” Lewis breathes, going slightly pale.

It’s the first time his brother has seemed shocked – genuinely shocked – the entire time he’s been visiting.

Lane sets his jaw, angry with himself for having given this much away, and starts walking again, moving quickly toward the door of his bedroom. “I don’t want to talk about it any more.”

“You can’t possibly be serious,” Lewis continues to follow him, sounding less and less glib with every sentence. “How the hell could you have introduced a woman like her to that foul creature? Knowing what he might do?”

Normally, Lane would shoot back with a reprimand, but he can’t get the words to form together, and squeezes his eyes shut against the pulsing terror in his head. “You—you can’t say those things. He’s our—”

“I know precisely what he is,” Lewis hisses. His eyes have grown cold. “I defy you to tell me that he’s changed—”

“Shut up!” Lane pushes past his brother and in the opposite direction of the hallway, into the kitchen. “For god’s sake, don’t you ever tire of the sound of your own voice, all you do is follow me everywhere, asking me questions!”

“Was he in this house? Why did he come here? What did he do?”

The moment he reaches the counter, Lane reaches for the nearest empty pot, still sitting on the counter, and grabs it by one handle, tossing it into the floor. It bounces off the edge of a cabinet and the lid clatters out, rolling toward the icebox. The noise of the crash is practically deafening, and makes the pounding in his head worse. He can hardly speak after all that shouting. His throat’s so tight it’s as if he’s strained his voice.

“Shut up!”

“Did he hurt her?” Lewis asks quietly.

“Stop it,” Lane pleads, sucking in a sharp breath as he slumps over the countertop, his palms braced against the linoleum, desperately wanting to cover his ears. “Please—”

His brother’s voice is practically a whisper. “Not—you?”

Lane’s gasping in shallow breaths now, struggling to draw air into his lungs. All he can see in his
peripheral vision is a shadow standing over him, a dark wingtip crushing his fingers, crushing his windpipe, oh god, he can’t breathe, he can’t move, he feels dizzy, he feels like crying. “God, I—can’t—I c—”

Can’t breathe can’t breathe can’t—

When he comes back to himself, he’s lying on his side on the cold tile—achy and shivering—face damp—completely wrung out, unable to draw in a breath without making a horrible whimpering noise. There’s a crumpled paper bag by his left hand—someone kneeling over him, saying something—fingers stroking over the back of his neck. He startles away from the touch.

“No, it’s all right,” a baritone voice murmurs, but Lane still tries to scrabble away, feels dizzy all over again once he’s pushed himself upright, and has to lean against the nearest cupboard for support. From this angle, even amongst all the swimming in his vision, he can just make out his brother’s lanky figure, crouched a few feet away, now. Oh, god. Did he—did it—

“One of your episodes,” Lewis sounds horrified. Lane cannot see the other man’s face as he speaks. “You’ve started having them again?”

“I’m tired,” Lane croaks in a pathetic way, feeling his eyes sting with fresh tears, and hating it. A young man never shows weakness. “I’m really—very tired.”

He has to close his eyes this time, tipping his head back against the rough wood. He can’t help it. Everything hurts.

**

Myra sighs and stretches her neck from side to side as Lane walks away from their usual lunch booth. That was a hard hour; he was high-strung today. Two dirty plates, stray silverware and half-full teacups still litter the bright tabletop. He didn’t bring his walking stick with him, either by accident or by design, but it’s clear he won’t need it for much longer. His walk is very steady—he’s one of the fortunate ones—and right now, he’s striding so quickly out of the restaurant it’s like he’s expecting her to rush out and tail him back to work.

Ordering a cup of coffee from a passing waitress, she takes out her legal pad, flips to the first fresh sheet of paper, and makes a few quick notes. He’s not doing as well at work as he’d like, judging by his own admission, and has anxiety about a partners’ meeting that’s happening next week. Or in two weeks. Joan will be back for that one, so Myra’s sure she’ll hear the full story in time, but he was very cagey about describing why it made him so anxious.

Physically, he’s admitted to stronger headaches, but no full migraines that he can remember. Unless his usual reticence about pain is code for they’re actually migraines. She thinks he may have had a bout of them shortly after returning to work, and makes a note to have him start writing down his meals again, in case they’re food triggered. Hm. Mayonnaise, shellfish…and there’s a third one. She’s writing two question marks in the margin of her paper when a movement from the end of the lunch counter draws her attention—a familiar-looking man putting a newspaper aside with an expression that says he’s barely been reading it. A man who has gotten on Myra’s last nerve. Oh, good god.

She closes her legal pad, shoves it into her open satchel, and places the paper napkin that’s sitting in her lap onto one of the dirty plates. It covers Lane’s half-eaten sandwich as she stands up, summons her best don’t-backtalk glare, and crosses the restaurant toward Lane’s brother, placing a hand on the man’s elbow as she deftly takes the sports pages from the slick counter.
“Pick up your plate, and come sit with me right now,” she says first, quietly, in a kind of pleasant-aggressive way, forceful enough to make him turn to stare at her with raised eyebrows but not loud enough to get anyone else gossiping.

Lewis isn’t able to summon up his usual dose of amusement, but doesn’t pretend to have misheard, just picks up his mug – leaving his chicken salad behind – and follows her back to the booth where she and Lane had been sitting earlier.

The plates and trash have now been cleared from the table, along with Myra’s full coffee cup. She lets out a sigh. There are big water rings on the table from where two full glasses of ice sat melting throughout their session, and a glob of mustard is drying next to the bottom of the salt shaker.

“I don’t like people eavesdropping on my private sessions,” she says first, crossing her arms over her chest in a defiant way.

The older man makes a skeptical face. “My dear girl—”

“Stop,” Myra makes her voice commanding, the way she does with unruly patients. “Yes or no, could you hear us talking?”

His eyes snap to hers – with no hesitation, no slight widening or pupil dilation – but she can also see that they’re slightly bloodshot, and drooping at the corners, as if he’s exhausted. Under her watchful gaze, his skeptical expression fades into something more placid, but no less guarded. “Not with the noise.”

“But you wanted to keep tabs on what he was doing,” she says, dropping her arms after another moment, and folding her hands over one another on the tabletop. “Don’t you have anything better to do than play pretend?”

He scoffs out a noise like a laugh. “Forgive me for interrupting your moment of import, but I am not playing at anything.”

“You’re worried about him.” She notices the way he draws himself up for a fight after she says this, and is careful not to follow it with an accusation. “I don’t think you would be here otherwise.”

His expression stays carefully flat, except for a telltale flicker of emotion in his eyes. They sweep the surface of the table in a single glance, then meet her steady gaze. “Is this the moment where you feel compelled to share something very uplifting and prosaic?”

Myra feels the instinct in her gut as surely as she can see it in his disaffected manner. This man is terrified, and can’t admit it. Just like his brother. On an impulse, she reaches into her satchel for her small change purse, opening it quickly and placing a shiny quarter onto the table.

“Look,” she says first. “Give me this quarter, and you’ll be my patient. As your nurse, I’ll be legally obligated to keep any and all confidences.”

He blinks at her, but there’s no confusion in his voice as he speaks.

“You would not be required to answer my questions, should I ask them.”

“Not if they violated the confidentiality of other patients.” She tries to put him at ease. He’s not as easy to read as Lane, and he definitely won’t be as trusting. “Or if it meant danger. But I would answer anything you asked to the best of my ability, and I would legally be unable to share specifics of this conversation.”
“Golly,” he says dryly. “How marvelous that power must seem.”

“Psychiatric help, five cents,” she jokes.

He doesn’t seem to get the reference, but after another moment of thought, leans forward, picks up the quarter that sits between them on the table, and hands it back to her in a very purposeful motion, holding it between his finger and thumb.

“Well, then.” She replaces the coin in her purse. “What’s on your mind?”

“How did you come to be hired?” Lewis takes his cigarette case from his jacket pocket as he speaks. “Did you work with Lane while he was in hospital?”

She holds up a hand, signaling for him not to open it. “I’d appreciate if you wouldn’t smoke. Most of my work is with respiratory cases.”

He pauses mid-motion with the cigarette case still gripped in his hand, and slowly returns it back to his pocket as she continues.

“When my case load is smaller, I sometimes work a few hospital shifts just to keep my feet wet. I was assigned to Lane’s floor—”

“He’d never ask you for help,” Lewis interrupts with a huff. “You’re a stranger.”

Myra smiles, trying to be patient. “You’re right. He didn’t.”

After a moment, understanding crosses his face. “Mrs. Harris, then?”

Myra nods.

“Ah. And how, precisely, did the two of you meet?”

“Confidential,” Myra says. Lewis raises an eyebrow.

“But she approached you on behalf of my brother.”

“That’s right.”

“And I imagine you cannot tell me how she spoke about him, or give me information on his condition at the time.”

“What I will tell you is that she was worried.” Myra lets out a small sigh, spreading her hands in a little shrug. “Which you’ve already guessed.”

Lewis looks annoyed, shifting in his seat. “Guessed. That is all I seem to do in this particular case.”

“Have you tried talking to him?” she asks gently.

Not interrogating Lane, or cherrypicking through his replies, but asking questions and actively listening to the answers, if they’re even given.

The man’s expression turns mutinous. “Do you know that Lane often forgets what he’s had for breakfast?” There’s a suspicious air to Lewis’s voice as he speaks. “Has to write everything down in that little black diary, down to the smallest detail. Even things he was writing less than ten minutes earlier.”
“People get older,” she says quietly. “Things get lost.”

“Whole swaths of time across a period of years,” Lewis continues as if he isn’t convinced, leaning forward in his seat. “Not fool’s details—seminal days. Being sent to school. Graduations. His wedding, for god’s sake, although that’s a bloody mercy in the end, with things as they are.”

“You really should—”

“Lane could figure advanced sums and read novels thick as this table before he’d even turned six. He misplaces his glasses and smudges ink on his nose. He does not lose scores of memories without a reason.”

“You still think of him as a little boy,” Myra observes in an even voice, her brow knitting down for a second.

“This is not a game to me, damn it,” Lewis doesn’t engage on the point she made, although she can tell that it’s struck a nerve. His voice is low and impassioned. “I refuse to be pushed aside when he’s in such a state. Anxious episodes—trouble at work—that bloody walking stick—”

“Please talk to him.” Myra’s heart hammers a quick pulse against her throat. “That’s the only way you’re going to get the answers you need.”

“Why should Lane speak to me about anything?” He flicks two fingers in her direction in a casual motion, as if trying to keep himself from pointing at her again. “Little brother has a team of paid professionals to see to him, and – lest we forget – he also has the imitable Mrs. Harris, to whom and with whom he shares all things.”

Fed up with his nonchalant attitude, Myra decides to lead with the truth. “No one’s trying to replace you.”

Lewis slides toward the edge of the booth, and stands up, buttoning his jacket and pulling out a battered brown leather wallet. “My dear, Lane has made it perfectly clear he doesn’t trust me. I doubt an hour of special conversation is going to change any of that.”

With that, he walks away from her, deposits four dollars on the counter next to his barely-touched food, and slips out of the restaurant as quietly as he’d come in. Bracing her elbow on the table, Myra leans heavily on one palm, sighing out a long breath, and gets the attention of a waitress passing by her booth, who’s headed toward a messy place at the counter with a rag in hand.

“Excuse me, can I get a fresh coffee, please?”

**

Outside, sitting at the bar under a shady grove of palm trees which line the perimeter of their resort, Joan accepts a refreshed drink from the young, long-haired bartender with a little smile; she can’t help but notice the way his hazel eyes linger on her before he turns away to help another customer.

“Well, it seems someone’s trying to get my attention.”

Joan glances right to see her mother carefully eyeing an older gentleman sitting at the far corner of the long bar. At first glance, he looks like a retiree—grey-haired, on the craggy side of good looking, and wearing a pressed short-sleeved polo and khaki trousers—but if she’s right, he definitely isn’t looking at her mother.

“You think so?” she asks, raising an eyebrow.
“Joanie, I think I know when a man is trying to get an eyeful,” Gail replies sharply, and flutters a hand toward the bartender as she slides off of her barstool, making her voice light. “Honey, would you mind bringing me a refreshed drink in a couple of minutes? I’m just going to make conversation with that nice gentleman, over there.”

“You’re going to embarrass yourself,” Joan points out, as the bartender walks away to get a clean glass.

“So what?” Gail smooths a nonexistent wrinkle out of her pink floral dress. “I’ll never see any of these people again. If you were smart, you’d find company, too.”

Joan raises an eyebrow, her eyes automatically darting to the face of her quartz watch. “Kevin’s been with the babysitter for three hours.”

“And you’ve been going to bed alone for more than a year,” Gail retorts. “We’re on vacation. Nobody’s getting any younger.” She picks up her pocketbook from the lacquered bar, straightens her shoulders, and walks toward the end of the bar, pointing toward the retiree’s shirt as she begins to make conversation.

God. That remark was downright offensive, but it doesn’t make the bare fact any less true. When Joan glances down to the end of the bar a second time, her mother and the retiree are shaking hands. He’s smiling so broadly his teeth flash a little in the setting sun. She can’t help rolling her eyes a little. Her mother can be so desperate sometimes.

A noise across the bar gets Joan’s attention, and when she turns, she sees the bartender standing a few feet down the counter, an empty silver shaker in his hand.

“Would you let me make you something?” he asks, catching her eye. His gaze flicks to her almost-empty rocks glass. “Personally, I don’t think you should settle for a whiskey and coke when you’re out of town.”

Her mouth purses into a little smirk. It’s not the worst line she’s ever heard—and she only ordered whiskey on a whim. “What makes you think I’m a tourist?”

Walking down the hallway toward his flat, Lane gets within a few yards of his doorway only to find three young people in bell-bottomed trousers and casual shirts emerging from his flat, carrying a sort of long metal sculpture between them. It rattles at the joints as it’s carried out. Oh, good lord, is that a—?

“Careful with the chest!” warns a high-pitched voice, and a fourth person sidles out into the corridor and into view from somewhere around the breastplate and neck. Lane can see this person’s arms braced under the suit of armor’s shoulders and back, completely obscuring his face.

“I am!” grumbles one of the others as they turn.

“Careful with the chest!” warns a high-pitched voice, and a fourth person sidles out into the corridor and into view from somewhere around the breastplate and neck. Lane can see this person’s arms braced under the suit of armor’s shoulders and back, completely obscuring his face.

“I am!” grumbles one of the others as they turn.

“Oh—terribly sorry,” Lane says as a reflex, after they nearly run him into the wallpaper as they pass.

“No problem, man,” one of the boys calls back. The faceplate snaps back with an angry noise as they continue to ease the long suit of armor down the hall and towards the service lifts.

Lane watches them walk away for a moment, then finally marches into his flat to find Lewis standing in the foyer next to a stack of five large boxes, thumbing through a thick wad of twenty dollar bills.
“Three hundred dollars,” his brother says triumphantly, raising the stack of cash into the air as if in a hello. “Quite a victory, really.”

“Three—” Lane sputters, putting his briefcase and coat aside. “Oh, for god’s sake, Lewis, we didn’t even pay that much for it in the first place!”

“Really?” His brother looks thrilled. “How much was it?”

Lane’s completely unable to remember, but refuses to admit this, shutting the door behind him instead. “It doesn’t matter! They were children!”

“University students,” Lewis folds up a bit of the money and puts it into his pocket as he speaks, “spending Mummy and Daddy’s money. They’re making a period film. And now they’ve a lovely antique.”

“You don’t even know if it was antique.”

His brother shrugs. “Well, I shouldn’t worry. It certainly could be.”

“That isn’t the point, and you know it,” Lane folds his arms over his chest. “Have you nothing better to do than barter away half my belongings?”

“That hideous monstrosity,” Lewis says pointedly, his eyes flicking toward the now-closed doorway, “was not yours.”

“It was in my office,” Lane snaps.

“And has since been mildewing in the basement for years, judging by the many layers of grime—”

“I don’t care about that—and I don’t care about any of this!” Lane jabs a hand toward the boxes lining one side of the room. “What does it matter if I’ve things in storage, or things up here? Why should anyone else care what the place looks like? It’s my flat!”

“Well, you ought to care,” Lewis leans against the nearest doorframe with a huff of breath. “And if no one else is brave enough to tell you that much, than I shall. How on earth are you supposed to live with it in this condition?”

“Don’t act as if you’re bestowing some incredible generosity—all you’ve done is get in the way—”

“Everything coated in dust! Food rotting away in the back of the icebox—”

“—boxes in the hall, going through the bureaus—”

“I’ve half a mind to clean out Nigel’s room next.”

“You will not,” Lane snaps, so vehemently it startles him. “Don’t you dare touch any of his things! It’s bad enough you’re sleeping in there.”

Lewis’s eyebrows jump up in surprise, but when he speaks, it’s quiet, as if he understands he’s said something wrong and is now trying not to make a fuss. “It’s a place for a child, Lane. Not a young man.”

“Don’t call him that! He might be—might be—” Lane sputters to a halt, horrified at his sudden lapse of memory, frantically trying to count back the years in his mind. Oh, god. Oh, my god. Fifty one? Fifty two? What year was he born?
“Twelve,” Lewis supplies in a raspy voice, looking stunned. “He’s—for god’s sake, don’t you remember?”

“I know that,” Lane whispers quickly, putting a hand to his forehead. He’s not too far gone to do the maths, and feels his head swim as he speaks again, even more quickly. “Fifty five. Twelve years. I know that. Birthday’s in the spring.”

Still can’t remember the day—only the month. Near Easter.

“What’s happened to you?”

He jerks his head up to meet Lewis’s gaze, who’s staring at him with a distinctly fearful expression, like he’s witnessed something very disturbing and doesn’t know what to do next.

“Nothing,” Lane blurts first, arm extended as if trying to physically push his brother away.

“But you got divorced,” Lewis continues, still quiet, as if this will somehow blunt the blow of his words. “After twenty years, that woman leaves you—”

“She wanted to go,” Lane interrupts, trying not to visibly react to this pronouncement, “and that is her affair—”

“—and your flat is in shambles—”

“—I’ve been—busy—”

“—and you missed months of work.”

This brings Lane up short. “Who told you that?”

“Everyone in your office mentions it.” Lewis lifts his hands as if in surrender, “but none of them have the same story. You were sick, or took leave, or went back to England—the only thing they agree on is that you were gone.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter,” Lane says quickly, scowling at the idea of gossip. “Everything’s…fine.”

“You can’t remember your son’s birthday. The same man who phoned me in tears the day Nigel was born, telling me he was so proud he wanted to burst.”

Lane lets out a great whoosh of breath, closing his eyes for a moment. When he opens them again, Lewis is studying his face, mouth pressed into a thin line.

“You downplay and pretend and call it nothing. I’ll never believe that.”

Lane’s so tired of avoiding all the horrible questions that he nearly just gives up and admits the truth.

“It’s not—” he begins, but then stops, feeling the telltale dread thump to life in his temples and stomach. He’ll hate you. “You would never understand.”

There’s a long silence.

“You used to talk to me about everything,” Lewis says softly.

“Well, we don’t talk now, do we?” Lane counters, then sighs again. His head is beginning to ache in a way that suggests he ought to have a lie-down.
“I’m going to bed,” is all he says, and waves a hand in Lewis’s direction before he goes. “Just—do not change anything in that room. It’s bad enough you’re staying there in the first place.”

“I have a hotel room—”

Lane’s tired of hearing this excuse. “So you keep saying, but you’re always here, aren’t you?” He doesn’t even bother to say good night before escaping into his room and shutting the door behind him, slumping back against the doorway and breathing deeply in an attempt to calm his nerves.

**

The next morning, there’s voices in the hallway at an indecent hour. Lane gets out of bed and walks into the hall to find his brother standing by the front door – slightly open – and only dressed in his housecoat and slippers. After a moment, Lewis closes the door with a soft huff of breath. Why on earth would anyone be knocking?

“Who are you talking to?”

Lewis turns toward him and holds up the paper in wordless explanation, then foregoes the silence. “Your paperboy has an entire route to follow before attending his classes. He’s stopping at the second floor next, then on to the building next door. Shall I go on?”

“For god’s sake, Lewis, I know what a paper route is,” Lane snaps. “I am asking why you needed to speak to him at all!”

“Common courtesy, little brother.” Lewis’s eyes flick Lane up and down as if he’s judging Lane’s disheveled appearance, making Lane pull his housecoat more tightly around his middle. “I happened to open the door as the lad was passing by. Perhaps you’ll understand the impulse for conversation one of these days.”

Tucked under Lewis’s right arm is a small bundle of fabric with a bright print—why would that—hang on, are those Nigel’s bedsheets?

“What are you doing with those?” Lane demands loudly. “I told you—”

“Don’t shout, please.” Lewis holds up his free hand as if stopping an argument. “Just putting them in the wash. They haven’t been cleaned in ages.”

“Oh.” Lane can’t find fault with that at all, which is disappointing. “Well, I suppose that’s, er, fine. Erm. I’ll just—” he doesn’t know what he’s going to say until the words come tumbling out of his mouth—“go in early.”

Lewis stares at him like he’s grown four heads. “At half past five?”

In the end, Lane gets to work just before seven. He’s alone in the office for the first morning in several days. The absence of clicking typewriters and jingling telephones is no loss, and the quiet in creative is nice, also. But after forty minutes sitting at his desk, he’s frustrated. The paperwork in his inbox is badly done – credit Harry Crane – he’s certain he’s misplaced the billings file for Topaz though it was in his hand only moments ago, and for god’s sake, have the fluorescent lights always buzzed so loudly? The noise drives him so mad that he actually makes a note in his diary – ask Joan. She’ll know how to fix it, he’s certain.

It’s a relief when the door to reception bursts open down the hallway, and a moment later, Stan Rizzo’s voice echoes down the hallway, all flirtation and charm.
“Morning.”

Girlish laughter ensues, followed by a single secretary’s voice. “Hi, Stan.”

Lane’s relief lasts as long as it takes for Stan to open creative’s door, sling his rucksack into the floor, and start up the record player, which blares rock and roll at what will probably prove to be migraine-inducing volumes.

When the lad begins to sing—in a very off-key falsetto—that becomes the final straw in the matter.

“Oh, honestly,” Lane grumbles aloud, slanting a knowing glance toward Joan’s usual place on the sofa, and feeling melancholy when no one is there to return it.

**

“So, I’ve got another shift at the tiki bar tonight.”

Lying half-naked on top of the sheets, Joan turns her face away from the window to glance at Joseph, who’s standing at the foot of the bed. He’s already put on his slacks and is shrugging back into his button-down. The sight of him towering over her double bed in only half his clothes almost makes her laugh. With his height and build, and that five o’clock shadow, he looks like a Greek god. In any other situation, she definitely wouldn’t kick him out of bed, but it’s two o’clock already, and her mother and the baby are due back from lunch any minute.

“Sounds exciting,” she says, waiting for the unspoken invitation that’s already tacked to the end of that sentence.

He snorts out a laugh, continuing to button his shirt. “Sure. Pouring seven and sevens for drunk old broads.”

Joan quirks an eyebrow. “You shouldn’t talk about my mother that way.”

“We both know she only drinks bourbon,” he answers dryly.

They share a smile. He finishes buttoning his shirt, and straightens the cuffs, walking to the nearest chair to grab his tie and his dark uniform blazer. She takes the opportunity to watch him walk away.

He knots the tie at his collar in an easy, practiced motion. “So, can I, uh, count on seeing you later?”

She scrunches her nose up in apology, attempting to keep things light as she gets to her feet and pulls her floral robe around her, tying it tightly around her waist. “I have a date with my son tonight.”

“Oh, come on.” He buttons his blazer and moves toward her, his shoulder-length hair falling gently around their faces as he leans in for another kiss. “Bring him by the bar. People do that all the time.”

“Trust me,” she sighs when he pulls back, and leans down to kiss her neck, hoping her voice comes out patient. “No one wants a two year old at the counter knocking down all your salt shakers.”

He kisses her pulse point, making her hum out a happy noise. “Wouldn’t your mother watch him for you?”

Joan’s eyes flutter open, and she gently presses her palms against Joseph’s shoulders to get him to look at her, pushing down the spike of irritation that threatens to ruin the moment. She’s not going to cancel on a little boy for someone she just met, for god’s sake. “She’s on vacation, too.”

Joseph’s brow creases in a frown, and so Joan puts one hand to his face in an attempt to keep from
arguing about it any more. His strong jaw twitches under her palm as she speaks. “I had a lot of fun today.”

After a moment, he nods, and a broad smile stretches across his face. “Me too.”

That’s all they’re able to say before there’s a loud thump and a high-pitched voice at the closed door—Kevin’s. “Mama! Mama!”

“For god’s sake, honey,” her mother says, “don’t beat the door down. We’re unlocking it. Look.”

At the noise, Joan’s eyes widen and she steps backwards, putting over a foot of distance between them, and motioning that Joseph should be ready to go once the door opens. He glances around the room to make sure he’s got the rest of his things, and begins talking in a professional voice the second the others step into the room.

“Of course, Mrs. Harris. I’ll have housekeeping sent up immediately.”

“Thank you,” Joan says quietly. Joseph gives her a perfunctory nod, and walks toward the door, offering a pleasant hello to her mother as he leaves.

Judging by the wide smirk on her mother’s face, she doesn’t buy this little show, but Joan doesn’t care. It’s mostly for Kevin’s benefit, not that he’s noticed. Her mother’s holding him by the hand, but he pulls away from her to run to Joan and hug her leg.

“Mama go sleep?” he asks, frowning up at her.

Her mother actually snickers.

Joan pretends not to hear this, and just smiles brightly at him, nudging his hand away from the hem of her robe. “Mama’s up now.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I started this chapter back in May or June, finished it in late September, and just now realized it hadn't been posted. Whoops! I really enjoyed writing worried Lewis here, particularly in his interactions with new characters. He's not panicky or anxious like Lane, but he's losing some of his sardonic little edge now that he's starting to get the lay of the land re: Lane's situation. And he's also proving to be slightly useful. So we'll see that develop down the line! I also wanted Joan to go on vacation and have a hookup that was not straight-up disastrous. She's earned that much. :)
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

TW for suicide talk.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Facing the mirror in everything but his suit jacket, Lane takes his comb in one hand and carefully brushes his hair back from his face—once, twice. His hand trembles a little as he lowers the comb for the usual part down the side, and in the end he musses up the front in a way that makes him look rumpled and ridiculous.

Oh, for god’s sake! He shoves the comb down onto the counter in frustration, glaring at the mirror. Why won’t it come out right?

Just as he’s trying to part his hair the other way instead, someone pounds on the closed door with an open hand. “For Christ’s sake, little brother! Are you ever going to leave the toilet, or shall I drag you out by the ear?”

Lane opens the door to peer out into the hallway, and make some innocent remark, but the second there’s room to spare, Lewis pushes his way past and into the small room, his bathrobe already untied, sliding a hand into the front of his pajamas the second he gets to the toilet.

“Good lord!” Lane quickly averts his gaze to keep from being blinded by this particular horror. “Use the other one!”

“It’s broken, and you’ve been in here twenty minutes,” Lewis says on the edge of a sigh.

Lane fixes his gaze on a corner of the ceiling by the doorway, to his left. “Br—what did you do to it? I am getting ready for work!”

The toilet flushes, and there’s a rustle of fabric. When Lane risks a glance back at his brother, Lewis is decent again, and nudges Lane aside with an elbow in order to rinse his hands.

“Been fixing your hair, all this time?” he asks with an amused sniff, as he turns off the taps.

Lane flushes red. “If you must know, I have a very important appointment.”

“At seven o’clock in the morning.” Lewis’s face says he doesn’t believe this for a second. “Who will you be meeting?”

Fine. The appointment in question is with Joan, so they can catch up a bit before her first day back. Not that his brother needs to know this piece of information.

“Will you stop bothering me?” Lane yanks at the bottom of his waistcoat in order to straighten it, pointedly avoiding the question.

As Lewis dries his hands on a nearby towel, he jerks his chin toward their dual reflections in the mirror, mouth pursed in a way that means he notices something out of the ordinary. “Spot on that shirt, you know.”
Lane’s eyes widen in horror, and when he pushes up his glasses and squints at the mirror, he can see what Lewis means—a purple-blue blob next to his waistcoat. “Oh my god.” He pulls off his suit jacket with an expression bordering on panic, and lets it fall to the floor. “I'll have to change!”

Without another word, he marches toward the bedroom, mouth set in a determined line.

“Oh, will your appointment notice such things?” Lewis says slyly. A moment later, he appears in the doorway holding Lane’s suit jacket in one hand.

“I should never have eaten that toast,” Lane snaps, trying to ignore his brother’s jab. When he finally pulls a new shirt from the master closet, he wonders if he should change waistcoats, as well, and takes a red and blue-checked houndstooth out for inspection. Bit tropical, perhaps.

“They won’t go together,” Lewis gestures toward the waistcoat in Lane’s hands with the jacket. “Not with that tweed.”

Lane shoots his brother a glare. “Well, it doesn't matter!”

But he still stares down at his trousers as if the fabric’s personally betrayed him. After another moment, he reaches into the closet again, yanks out a brown houndstooth suit on a hanger, and stalks back toward the toilet, in an attempt to change in peace.

“Try something in navy,” Lewis calls from the bedroom.

“Will you be quiet?”

Lane slams the lavatory door with as much force as possible, and feels very satisfied when Lewis doesn’t say anything else in return.

**

“Oh, blast it, you again.”

Mark answers the phone without so much as a hello or any other conventional greeting.

Well, Lewis supposes that’s what comes from calling collect. He relaxes into the pillows of the single bunk, and places his brandy onto the side table next to the half-full ashtray. Perhaps it really wasn’t fair to extend the telephone line into Nigel’s bedroom when the electrician was round—and buy a new handset on top of it—but if Lane didn’t want drastic measures to be taken, he really ought to have kept closer watch on his utilities.

And that chair in the sitting room was getting to be damn uncomfortable.

“God, I knew it.” Lewis checks his watch as a force of habit, shifts the phone to his shoulder. Not even nine o’clock there. How terribly disappointing. “You’re a dreadful bore without me.”

“Yes, it’s ever so dull, not watching you fling plates into the sink when you don’t get your way. I think I now understand why some insects eat their mates.”

“Well, no one would possibly eat you, darling.” Lewis reaches for his cigarette, still burning in the ashtray. “You’re geriatric.”

“Says the ancient relic. I’m sure we can convince some archaeologists to come and have a look at you eventually.”

Lewis heaves out a sigh. Oh, it is nice to battle wits after so long away. “Have pity on me, damn it.
Little brother’s bloody exhausting.”

Mark sounds as if he is not surprised. “Mum’s the word, then?”

“No words at all, rather,” Lewis says sourly. “Only reliable thing he tells me is to bugger off—with less color, if you can possibly imagine it.”

“Charming.”

“Spends all his time with his nurse therapist and his lady love—the latter in hideous denial. He tells her everything. She’s told me nothing. It’s abominable.”

How can he trust a complete stranger, but not his own goddamn brother?

“Oh, are we being jealous or curious?” Mark simpers.

“Bite your tongue, cat.” Lewis slams the phone down in a fit of pique, and feels very proud of himself when he decides not to ring back straightaway.

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“Scarlett, what do you mean, they’re on vacation?” Lane pushes his message slips to one side of his desk with a frustrated noise. This single motion accidentally displaces a stack of folders, and nearly upsets the cup of tea at his right hand. By some miracle, he’s able to steady the cup before it tips across his entire desk.

His secretary stands a few feet away, with her hands twisted in a nervous knot. “I’m sorry. That’s what the, um, solicitor said.”

“For god’s sake. Nigel’s supposed to be in school,” Lane grumbles to no one in particular. “Not on some ridiculous holiday.”

Why the hell would Becca have taken him anywhere, this time of year?

On the sofa, Lewis sits hunched over two sheets of paper, and begins tapping his pen against the top of the side table, which sets Lane’s teeth on edge. The idiot is pretending to write someone very intently while just using it as an excuse to eavesdrop. God, Lane has never hated him more. Why doesn’t his brother have anything better to do than be a bloody nuisance?

“I’m sorry,” Scarlett gives him a sympathetic look, which sets Lane’s teeth on edge. He isn’t to be pitied, thank you. “Did you want me to try again tomorrow? He didn’t say when she’d be back.”

“No,” growls Lane, closing his eyes against a growing headache. Every time he and Rebecca attempt to speak through the lawyers, he ends up with migraines. She never gets back to him on time. “Just—thank you. You may go.”

Once the door shuts behind her, Lane fixes Lewis with the nastiest glare he can muster. “Why can’t you do that somewhere else?”

“Can’t hear you. Trying to concentrate,” Lewis replies with a blithe shrug, repositioning himself so his letter is now laid out on the middle of the sofa.

Lane waits for the biting comment he knows will follow this inane proclamation. Thankfully, his brother is almost frighteningly predictable.

“Old Becky having a sex romp through Majorca, or something?”
“Don’t be vile,” Lane snaps, and gets to his feet, folding his arms across his chest before deciding that this is not enough. He needs privacy; he needs to think, and he can’t bloody well do it with this idiot around, making ridiculous assumptions and sticking his nose in where it doesn’t belong. “You don’t know anything.”

“Well, I shouldn’t think she’s having too much in the way of excitement. The boy’s with her, after all.”

A flash of anger burns through Lane’s chest as he pictures Becca on some expensive holiday, accompanied by a handsome, carefree lover. Refusing to show how much this image pains him, he storms over and snatches Lewis’s letter off the sofa cushion, evading his brother’s attempt to yank it away.

“Stop talking about her! Why did you come here, if all you mean to do is be horrible?”

“Look here.” The older man jumps to his feet immediately, holding out his hand. “Give it back.”

Lane raises an eyebrow, and tightens his grip on the stationery. It’s probably just the same idiot phrase written over and over again, and the fool is acting as if it’s some prized possession. “Why? You don’t give me any privacy. You arrive on my doorstep, disrupt my work—”

“Oh, I'm terribly sorry to disturb you!”

“Stop avoiding the question! Why did you come here?”

“You're acting like a child,” his brother says scornfully, his hand darting forward.

“I asked you a question,” Lane counters, stepping out of reach at once.

Lewis moves forward again. “I'm writing a letter. You told me to keep busy because you didn’t want to make conversation. Forgive me for obeying your idiotic wishes.”

Lane scoffs at the paper in his hand, and scans a few lines in the middle without even reading them properly. “Yes, because it’s obviously so important, how dare you not be able to gossip about—whatever the hell this is—?”

On second glance at the letter, he catches two distinct phrases:

_We shall rage together_

_...come off like a spout..._

before Lewis snatches the paper out of his grasp.

Oh, good god. Lane can’t even look at him—can hardly speak for embarrassment—and his cheeks flame hot with the humiliation of what he’s just read.

Meanwhile, his brother says nothing, just folds the paper into an uneven mess and shoves it into his inside jacket pocket. Lane steps back by reflex at the taut anger on Lewis’s face, but his brother does not move an inch, doesn’t raise his voice, just sets his jaw in a mulish way.

“I—I’m sorry,” Lane rubs an anxious hand over the back of his neck. Worry pounds in his chest and makes his palms sweat and his headache get worse. _Meant for his lover._ “I—I didn't mean to—”

“Oh, that is shit, Lane!” Lewis holds himself very still as he continues, but one of his fists is balled by his side. “You bloody well meant it. Own up to that much.”
Before his brother can say another word, Lane turns on his heel, walks straight out of his office, and slams the door behind him, bypassing Scarlett as he immediately turns his attention to Bridget.

“Is she in?” he asks tersely, nodding toward Joan’s closed door.

Frowning, the young girl nods. “Yes, but—”

Lane doesn’t wait, just keeps walking past her desk, turns the doorknob and sails inside.

Joan glances up from her paperwork, obviously startled, as Bridget’s voice crackles over the intercom.

“Um, Joan, Mr. Pryce is....”

“Sorry,” he says first, shutting the door behind him and sinking down into the chair opposite Joan’s. “Do you have a minute?”

Joan studies his pained expression with concern. “What happened?” She reaches for the cigarette case on her desk, then, just as suddenly, retracts her hand with a guilty look.

Wordlessly, Lane takes one, to prove she can smoke if she likes, but he doesn’t light it, just fumbles the cylinder around in his hands, not looking at her. “No. Erm, it’s nothing—it’s silly, but—Lewis and I just had a row. And we’re supposed to take lunch together in a few minutes but I—I’d rather not.”

Once he finally glances up, he notices she’s watching him carefully, her mouth pursed in a considering way. “So don’t go.”

Lane huffs out a sigh. “You make it sound very easy.”

“It is easy,” Joan closes an open folder, and then folds her hands into her lap. Like she can’t keep them unoccupied. “Leave without him. He can’t chase you out into the street.”

Lane sighs again, stares out into the creative lounge, where Peggy and the strange skinny boy are trading papers over the round table, and giggling over some private joke. They look so happy.

“I was planning to go in a few minutes,” Joan says next.

He fidgets in his chair, and glances back to her, feeling stupid for not realizing she had plans. “Oh. Well, don't let me keep you.”

The look she gives him plainly says don’t be an idiot. “I'm inviting you to come with me, if you're hungry.”

“Oh,” Lane says again, surprised. They haven’t taken a meal alone together in a long time. She brushes a speck of something from her desk as he keeps talking. “Well. Erm. What would you—where would we eat?”

**

Around their corner booth, the diner bustles with the end of the lunch rush: waitresses brushing bits of food from their yellow uniforms as they take orders, refill drinks, and bus away stray dishes. The counter is full of single people in suits and dresses, reading newspapers and dime-store paperbacks, absently picking at food, or trading quips with the cooks amid the frenetic movement in the kitchen.

Joan orders tea and a Cobb salad, while Lane gets an orange soda and stares at the menu for several
minutes without coming to a decision. In the end, he points at some type of roast beef item, and surrenders his menu with relief.

After several minutes of silence, she finally speaks. “Does it upset you that your brother's queer?”

He does a bit of a double take. Trust her not to bother with inanities. “Well. Lewis is—very fussy, but I wouldn't call him—”

Joan gives him a hard stare that says she isn’t under any illusions. “Honey, if he ever looked at a girl the way he sometimes looks at Pete Campbell, I'll have to warn him about preserving reputations.”

“You’re joking.” The room suddenly feels very warm. Lane does not want to imagine what she must have seen.

She shakes her head no. Lane sighs.

“Well, all right. Lewis is...” making a vague gesture of surrender with his hands, “but he's just—very bold about it here. I—I don't understand.”

“So you’re not angry?”

Lane is surprised to discover that this is more or less the truth. Not angry, no, just uncomfortable. Which is no worse than he feels about his brother on a normal basis; Lewis is always trying to push people up against their limits because he thinks it’s hilarious. And as to the rest, they’ve never spoken about that directly, not in a way that would matter. He can’t imagine what such a conversation would even entail. It would be utterly impossible.

“No, but he—well, he’s always been odd. You understand.”

Lane expects her to judge him for the lenience, but Joan just takes another sip of her tea, her mouth quirking up a bit after she lowers the cup back to the table.

“Are you a romantic.” A smile plays around her lips as she reaches for the sugar. “I just wondered what you’d argued about. You hate fights.”

“Oh.” Lane considers his next words carefully. “Well.”

Briefly, he explains about the phone call and the ensuing row; how he’d grabbed the letter from his brother's hands only to realize exactly what type of message it was. By the time he reaches the end of his explanation, Joan's studying him with a steadiness that makes him rather nervous.

“So he wrote his lover a dirty letter? That’s it?”

“It was much more than dirty,” Lane tries to convey the precise degree of obscenity by raising his eyebrows in a significant way. “It was very, very blue.”

The smile on her face is practically wolfish. “How blue was it?”

Lane glares at her. Obviously, he isn’t going to spell out the details!

“Really?” She hums out a disappointed noise when he doesn’t reply.

“Absolutely not.”

Joan leans forward, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. Her long gold pendant dangles onto the countertop. “Come on. Who would I tell?”
“I don’t know, and I don’t care, because I’m not saying any of those words to you,” Lane tells her firmly. “Full stop.”

Her eyes are dancing with amusement, but she simply leans back in her chair, and makes an impressed face. “So it was purple prose?”

Lane puts his face in his hands with a groan, remembering the last phrase all over again. *Come off like a spout.* Good god. How on earth could you put that in writing?

“How hilarious,” she sniffs.

When he looks up, Joan is grinning at him. He rubs at his eyes again.

“Augh. It’s bloody horrible.”

“For god’s sake, Lane,” she barely lowers her voice this time, now toying with the handle of her fork. “the man may be odd, but he isn’t a priest. How long has he lived with that roommate, anyway?”

Lane winces as a succession of hideous thoughts tumble into his mind at once. “Oh, stop it! That is not funny.”

She laughs even harder at his horrified expression, and shields her nose with one hand. “What? I’m just being honest. It’s probably been happening for years.”

“You’ve got to stop saying that,” he huffs, but he’s actually smiling despite his better judgment. “This is very serious.”

**

Roger’s halfway to Draper’s drink cart with an empty vodka bottle and a case of the crazy clients when he notices a guy around his age sitting at Dawn’s desk, wearing a three-piece suit and leafing through the middle of a purple *Photoplay* with Julie Andrews’s face on the cover.

Automatically, he glances right, looking for Caroline. No dice.

“Who the hell are you?” he finally asks.

“New hire,” says the man without looking up. “Nothing to look at, sorry.”

Roger laughs in spite of himself. “Jesus.”

“Think your friend’s gone out to buy more grog,” the man says next.

“Ah, shit.” Roger glances down at the neck of the bottle in his hand. “Are we out of vodka? What the hell happened to the supply closet?”

The man flips another page. Roger briefly wonders if there’d be sexy pictures in there, before deciding Julie wouldn’t go for that kind of thing. She’s classy.

“Wrath of Joan, apparently.”

Okay, that makes more sense. Joanie’s gotten downright puritanical about the liquor consumption these days. Probably because Draper goes through a hundred bottles a week and hoards it all to himself. Walking forward, Roger drops the empty into Dawn’s trash with a smirk, thumbing a hand at Don’s open door.
“You know, this guy’s terrified of her.”

“Hmph. So’s my brother.” The man looks up from his pages with a shit-eating grin, as he plants his feet back on the floor and leans forward to shake Roger’s hand. “Lewis Pryce.”


There’s something weirdly familiar about the guy, but Roger can’t quite piece it together until Pryce pulls his hand away, two fingers flicking toward the anchor cufflink pinning Roger’s sleeve.

“Pacific or Atlantic fleet?” he asks, and it clicks into place.

“Pacific. Hang on a second, were you in the South China Sea?”

“More like Siberia. HMS Ursula.”

“No shit!” Roger laughs; he can’t help it. Nobody in his unit wanted to serve on a u-boat, not unless they’d killed a man or hated seeing a girl for more than eight seconds every year. “The tin cans. What’d you do, slap your C.O.?”

Pryce shakes his head. “No. Volunteered.”

Roger pulls an impressed face. “Braver than I thought.”

A few days later, close to five o’clock, Lane’s phone rings just as he’s getting his things together to go home. Scarlett is chipper before patching it through – “nice to hear from you, Nigel!” – and so Lane answers the phone in a relatively good mood.

“You’re back already?” he says first, pushing his glasses higher up his nose. “How was it?”

“Back?” His son sounds puzzled, then makes a surprised noise. “Oh, Christ, no, I didn’t go with them.”

What is he talking about? “Your grandmother didn’t go, did she?”

“No,” his son scoffs, in a tone that means it should be very obvious. “Only Mum and Graham, obviously.”

Lane sits up in his chair as a shock jolts him into awareness. His brain goes scrambled with a sudden, sick confusion. “Who—who is—Graham?”

Perhaps it’s some companion of her mother’s. (Did Becca’s father pass? He was very ill at some point, but Lane can’t remember if the man actually died or not.) Perhaps it’s the husband of some toff friend. Or—or—some distant relative he can’t remember?

Nigel makes a kind of groaning noise. “Shit! Sorry. Erm, I’ll just—” he raises his voice for a moment. “Mum! Dad’s on the phone!”

Lane’s stomach sinks as he catches the next few pieces of conversation.

“Why would you—?”

“No, you’ve got to…the holiday or something…I didn’t know you hadn’t…”
Nigel hands the phone off. There is a second of rustling, and then—

“What is it?”

Rebecca’s voice is cool and flat, and so familiar that it sends a chill down Lane’s spine. He doesn’t remember the last time he heard her voice; it may be the first time they’ve spoken without the lawyers. Or perhaps the first time since...well, since it happened.

“Who—who did you go with on this holiday?” Lane is careful to keep his voice even, hoping he imagined hearing that some elderly beau or boyfriend is now hanging around the Winters house. “Nigel said—someone named Graham. You—went together.”

A short pause.

“We got married.” Becca says this quickly and with little inflection, as if she’s describing some awful errand instead of a momentous life choice. “Took a honeymoon. Nothing to fuss over.”

Something stalls in Lane’s brain.

“Married,” he repeats, floored. “But—but you didn’t say a word.”

“Well, I assumed your father told you.”

“For god’s sake.” Lane pinches the bridge of his nose with one hand. He can’t even count back the months in his head. Becca can’t have been seeing anyone very long at all. How on earth could she have gone out with anyone since the divorce, let alone been married? And how the hell would his father have found out first? “Why?”

“I don’t have to justify myself to you,” she says coldly.

“No,” Lane sputters through gritted teeth, “I mean, why are you speaking to my father?”

Unless she was seeing someone before, in England.

“He wants me to be happy,” she replies crisply. Lane barely has a handle on that before she’s passing him off. “I’ll put you back on with Nigel.”

“No, I-I don’t need to say anything to him.”

“Ah. Well.” She clears her throat as if it’s physically painful to say anything nice. “I’ll have Mr. Prentice phone about the alimony tomorrow. Good-by.”

“Good—” The dial tone sounds. Lane stares at the phone for so long, receiver clenched tightly in his fist, that he feels like the ground freezes solid underneath him. Married. Married. And she didn’t even have the decency to share the news before it happened.

I assumed your father told you.

“Unbelievable,” he spits, and slams the receiver down.

**

As he paces up and down the length of carpet in his living room, in front of the credenza, Lane decides that if he had any of Becca’s precious china at hand right now, he would smash it into tiny bits. There’s still a wedding portrait, hidden in Nigel’s room, and it’s taking all of his current effort not to storm in there and slash it right down the middle.
Sod it. Lane sheds his suit jacket and tosses it onto the sofa, not even bothering to hang it up. He barrels down the hall and into Nigel’s room before he can second-guess the impulse. Inside, Lewis is lying on the single bunk with the phone gripped in one hand.

“What on earth—” Lewis cuts him an alarmed look.

Lane just snatches the picture up, still facedown on Nigel’s tall dresser, by the piece of wire on the back of the frame. He’s storming out again and back in the living room before he can really process what he wants to do, and growls out wordless frustration as he realizes he didn’t even go into the kitchen. There’s nothing out here to cut it with.

For a moment, Lane forces himself to stare down at their beaming faces, unblinking: at Becca on the right hand side in her white gown, with her parents next to her, and at himself on the other with his father looming over his shoulder.

His father’s smile is an oily thing, nasty and false, and Becca’s is very strained—*I feel faint*, he thinks he remembers her telling him, *the veil’s so heavy*—as if he can already see the shadow of unhappiness in her face.

(Perhaps she’d told him nothing of the kind? Perhaps she’d just smiled and done her duty the way they were brought up to do, until everything went wrong?)

He looks back to the picture. Her parents are standing there the way they always do: serene and smug and so goddamned demanding. Everything about Lane was wrong. Everything they did together was wrong. Nigel wasn’t accepted at Eton and they didn’t redecorate the house every year and Becca *got married again*, for god’s sake. She didn’t even wait a single year.

Was it so easy, to cast off twenty years together?

From the doorway, Lewis clears his throat, walking into the room with slow, careful steps. “What are you doing with that?”

Lane rolls his eyes at his brother’s question, still gripping the picture in one hand. He can’t remember why he even brought it in here, now, but he can’t keep the news to himself anymore. It’s too much; it’s too painful.

“Becca—got married,” he chokes out.

Lewis’s jaw drops, but he closes his mouth after a moment. “Good god.”

“She’s getting everything she wanted,” Lane gestures toward the frame with his free hand, not sure whether he wants to laugh or scream over the unfairness of it all. “New life. New husband. Perhaps this chap can raise Nigel, too; he’ll probably do a better job of it.”

“Now—now, look here,” Lewis says quietly, holding up a hand in a way that says *careful*, but Lane ignores the gesture, and tosses the picture onto the ground with a petulant growl. The glass doesn’t break, but the right corner of the wooden frame splits straight down the seam, and he feels satisfied that this, at least, reflects the honest truth. Broken. Always broken.

“She was probably seeing someone long before any of this happened,” he says aloud. “How—how else could she have done it?”

“Why does it matter? Why should you care?” Lewis looks boggled, as if such a show of tantrum is absolutely beyond the pale. “She’s not worth it, Lane.”
“Don’t trifle with me, damn it! You have no idea—”

“You can’t honestly tell me you’re still in love with her! She’s ridiculous!”

"She was my wife!” Lane bellows, and on an impulse, he picks up a glass from the credenza and pitches it into the wall with a resounding smash.

Lewis stands frozen, staring at him as if he’s gone insane.

"How stupid can you possibly be?” Lane despises the gobsmacked look on his brother's face, as if he is so surprised by this piece of knowledge, as if it's so damned shocking. "How can you not understand? She's the one who left, and she’s already—obviously, I meant nothing to her! Our marriage meant nothing to her!”

Anger swirls inside him, the old rage creeping slowly into his bones, infecting him with its poisonous pull.

"She hates me, you know,” he continues in a low whisper. "She never loved me at all. She didn't even like me, in the end."

"Lane, let’s just—"

"Shut up!” Lane shouts, and to his great surprise, Lewis does, his mouth snapping closed the way it used to when they were children, sitting stiffly together at the dinner table, waiting for Father to speak, to move, to bat an eyelash in a way that meant trouble.

"You have no idea how long this has been hanging over my head, without my being able to talk about it to a single person! We spun out the same argument for years, over and over, ever since Nigel was a child!"

Lewis still does not speak, and although Lane had commanded his brother to be silent, for some reason the quiet is more infuriating than the arguments.

"After all the—after—Nigel was born, she didn't want—she wouldn’t allow me to touch her. She didn't want to be in the same room with me. She didn't even want me to speak to her. And we almost—god, we could have been rid of each other two years sooner if I hadn't gone to London and begged her to come back! We could have divorced, but I let our father force me into staying miserable!"

Lewis's face goes white.

"I was too afraid to stand up to him.” Lane's voice shakes. "The second he arrived, I saw what he wanted, I knew what he would do, and I p-pretended it didn't matter. I pretended that I wasn't a coward."

He glances at Lewis, expecting to be interrupted, and keeps talking in a rush to prevent this. His voice shakes over the next sentence.

"And he still—struck me. And she still hated me, even though she came back."

"Lane.” His brother clears his throat, now standing by the sofa, one hand reaching out for him as if he wants to clasp his arm.

"Don't!” Lane roars, all his rage contained in the single word. "You got free of him, for Christ's sake! And you have never cared what he thought of you, and you've never had a woman—never had a
wife or a child! You have no idea—the kinds of responsibilities my family and my father put on my shoulders! All the work I did to support her, all the time I put aside, and she gave me nothing! All she could think about was keeping up with her ridiculous friends—she bought that damned car like it was nothing! And it would have ruined us!"

Lewis's eyes flash as he slowly lowers himself into a seated position. Christ, he’s probably horrified, he’ll probably hate Lane for all of this, but Lane doesn't care about that anymore. He’s too exhausted to hide the truth any longer; it has weighed on him for so many years, like a low-hanging fog that’s impossible to shake. He’s almost short of breath from talking for so long, but he can’t stop; the words keep spilling out of his mouth, faster and faster.

"And she'd ask about money, and I'd tell her we were fine, when we weren't. She'd ask about work, and I'd tell her it was fine, when it wasn't. Everyone hated me. And—god, we just kept drifting from day to day, and week to week. Nigel was acting out and things were so miserable between us. I could see our lives stretching out together over the horizon like an endless grey cloud, and I-I couldn't do it anymore."

He shifts his gaze directly into the steel of Lewis's eyes, waving one arm toward the corridor in a vague way.

"And the—that night she left, I begged her to stay. I pleaded and wept—got down on my knees, just there in the hallway—and she didn’t care."

His voice trembles again. Lane puts a palm to his forehead as he glances down toward his shoes.

"And I drank everything we had in the house. I thought—I thought about how disappointing I've been, all my life; to Father and Mother, to you, to Becca, Nigel, to Joan and all the others—"

He has to stop talking. He feels as if his throat is closing.

"And after a few days, I got up. Put on a clean suit and tie, combed my hair, straightened my tie pin. And I took a paper grocery bag from underneath the cupboard, just—filled it with a few odds and ends. Garden hose. A rag. A scarf."

He risks a glance at Lewis, who still says nothing, sits hunched pale and mute on the sofa, jaw clenched so tightly it's as if he barely even breathes. At his side, his hands are gripped into vice-like fists.

"Even wrote out a note for the landlord." Lane heaves out a sigh as he swipes at damp eyes with one shirtsleeve. The memories are blurring together at this point. He can’t even recall where he put the note or what it said, just remembers carrying the yellow notepad around for days and days. "And then I—well, I must have taken the paper bag out into the garage to get the car ready."

The empty whiskey tumbler on the credenza sparkles in the dim lamplight. Lane stares at it for a moment as he braces himself to say the next few words aloud.

"That bloody Jaguar." He actually laughs a little; the absurdity of the next statement is not lost to him, even among the miasma of horror. "I was going to make it all stop, you know. Once I was gone, I wouldn't be such a disappointment. I wouldn't put my family through any more pain. I wouldn't be the penny-pinching—shit, he’s lost the word—it was something that everyone hated. I was going to feel peaceful. I-I was going to drop off and never wake up, and—and everyone would be better off. It was supposed to be very, very easy. Like falling asleep after a long day."

He feels water well up in his eyes again; closes them briefly so he doesn't have to see Lewis's
horrified face. Two hot tears spill down his cheeks.

"But it didn't work."

And it wasn't easy. It was nothing like I thought it would be.

head splitting lungs searing lights blinding

After several long seconds, Lane opens his eyes and waits for his brother to speak—for the sharp comment or droll volley that always follows their serious conversations.

But Lewis still says nothing. After nearly a minute without speaking, Lane turns and studies his brother, not sure how to prompt him or what to say next. Lewis’s elbows are braced on his knees. His eyes are red-rimmed and glassy, although no tears have fallen, and he’s staring soundlessly into the distance, jaw set and eyes unfocused, as if he’s been concussed.

“Do you think it matters now?” Lane finally whispers.

His brother snaps to attention. With one eye twitching, he flashes Lane a wretched, lemon-mouthed look meaning he can’t speak, and bolts to his feet. Without a word—with only a raised arm pushed in Lane’s general direction—he rushes from the room, toward the kitchen.

The door to the freight staircase swings open and slams shut.

Lane sits down hard on the carpet, his legs like rubber, and tries to focus on his breathing and his usual exercises. It's only for a moment. He'll come back. He always comes back.

He thumps the side of the couch with a single fist, once, twice, as many times as he can stand, until his knuckles accidentally smash into the wood of the armrest, and pain blooms bright against red, angry skin.

Chapter End Notes

This was pretty much the chapter where my old notes (from 3+ years ago) and my current set of notes diverged. Sorry for the long wait between updates, but I was trying to figure out the best bridge to this specific moment. I knew I wanted Lane and Lewis to have this conversation, but wasn’t sure how to get them there (other than a tenuous link with Nigel and Rebecca calling to share her news.)

One of the emotions I think Lane would have the hardest time expressing, both generally and re: his recovery, is how angry he was/still is with Becca, for putting him through twenty years of shit. Obviously we have the luxury of seeing where both sides went very wrong, but I do think to him, it feels like she abandoned him in his darkest hour. AND THEN on top of that, his abusive father takes her side when she gets over it so quickly! So Lane's not only lashing out at her and the unfairness of their relationship, but also at Lewis for saying it can be dismissed like it was nothing.

We'll see more of Lane and Lewis next chapter, and definitely more Lane and Joan, too. There's probably about 5-7 more chapters left before the end!
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lewis ends up in a telephone booth along the intersections of fuck-all and god-knows-where, stumbling inside with outstretched arms like he’s blind drunk, his palms slamming against the dirty panes and leaving greasy ghostlike fingerprints behind.

Goddamn it, he can’t even straighten up enough to meet his eyes in the reflection of the glass, all he can do is brace himself against the receiver and the little ledge next to the window, suck in breath after heaving breath.

He would have died alone

died ALONE

—get up, you worthless piece of shit, on your feet!—

Father’s voice. Oh, god. Lewis flexes his fingers around the receiver, half-hearted, experimental. He’s supposed to call Mark if he gets like this, but he can’t speak, can barely breathe through the cinching in his chest.

He would have died. He wanted to die.

Brushing limp red curls from Lane’s forehead as the little one climbs into his arms, needy, clumsy, voice high and uncertain: Lewis, I’m frightened.

“Hey!” shouts a voice from the street, jeering, childish. Something small strikes the windowpanes. A can or pebble. It clicks against the glass before it falls to the pavement. “Stop crying, you fucking fairy!”

Lewis pulls his hand away from the receiver, and slowly raises his head.

Stand up straight. Speak loudly.

“Ugh! You gonna come out here and snot on me, faggot?”

Slowly, with purpose, he forces his arms down to his sides, lets out a long, jagged breath and pushes open the door.

**

Lane’s been pacing through the flat for longer than he can remember, only stopping to glance at the clock on the living room mantle from time to time, although he doesn’t even know when Lewis left, or how long he’s been gone.

Something’s wrong. His brother’s gone back to his hotel, or perhaps—Lane’s stomach sinks—he’s finally gone home.
When the front door finally creaks open and Lewis walks inside, with one side of his face bruised, his shirtfront scuffed, and the knuckles of his left hand scabbed and bloodied, Lane can’t hide his shock.

“Good god!”

Lewis hisses out a noise of pain as he eases out of his jacket, lets it fall to the floor in a crumpled heap. “Better than it looks. Disagreement with some chap in the park.”

“The park?” Lane echoes, thunderstruck. “How did—did you get a taxi?”

Lewis shakes his head no, shedding items from his pockets next, and letting them plunk atop of his jacket. A thick wad of cash joins a dirty handkerchief and a few coins in the pile of fabric. “Course not.”

“You walked to the park?”

“Out to west seventy-something,” Lewis scrubs at his eyes with one hand, seems dead on his feet. “Or east, whatever. And then I came back.”

“Good lord,” Lane says. It must have taken hours.

Lewis heaves out a dull sigh. “I’ll—just wash up, then.”


First thing that pops into his head is fetch some ice, to keep the swelling down. Lane goes into the kitchen and yanks open the icebox, hoping to spy a nice large steak or a full tray of ice cubes. But all he’s got is a small bag of frozen peas.

“I suppose you’ll do,” he says aloud to it, as if the silly thing can talk back. He raises his voice so his brother can hear him. “Haven’t got any ice, Lewis, sorry!”

No answer. Lane sighs, takes the frozen bag of vegetables in hand, and walks back through the kitchen and across the hall. As he enters the sitting room, he takes a few steps, and promptly freezes.

His brother stands behind the sofa, with one tight fist pressed to his mouth, his eyes squeezed shut, and the other hand gripping the back of the sofa so tightly his knuckles strain white and red against the dark fabric.

Lane finds his voice, although it’s tremulous. “Lewis?”

His brother yanks his hand away from his mouth with a raspy sound like a cough, straightening up into some shadow of his usual posture. He clears his throat several times before he speaks. “Sorry. Boy had no business picking fights—practically a child. And yet I won.”

Lane stands motionless, watching one side of Lewis’s mouth twist upward, as if he’s trying to summon his usual winning smile.

“Father would have approved,” his brother continues roughly, with a sort of shrug. His mouth is still pursed in an odd way. “Always liked a fighter.”

“No, he didn’t.”

“No,” Lewis clears his throat again. “Christ.”
Lane puts the bag of peas aside on a nearby table, unsure how to ask his next question. “Are—are you sure you’re all right?”

Lewis tries to shrug. From this distance, it seems like a symptom from a cramped-up muscle, too stiff to seem genuine. “Course I’m—”

He wrenches his face to the right to obscure his expression, but it can’t hide the way his voice wobbles to a stop, and it doesn’t prevent Lane from hearing the bitten-back grunt that threatens to turn into a full-blown howl. Lewis is hunched forward, now, one hand still braced on the top of the cushions, and oh, god, Lane can’t ever remember seeing his brother in such despair. As if he’s defeated. As if all the fight’s gone out of him.

He steps forward, the gesture so automatic it’s practically a reflex, and keeps his voice very even and very calm. “Please, don’t.”

*It’s my fault. Please don’t be upset. I can’t bear it.*

Carefully, Lane puts his hands against his brother’s upper arm. The second they touch, Lewis actually shudders. He won’t look at Lane. His shoulders are shaking and he’s covering his mouth with his free hand and making this awful choking noise.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” Lane whispers over and over, but the words don’t seem to do any good. Lewis is *crying* and Lane can’t explain anything about that night without sounding ridiculous. He can’t remember the last time he saw his brother lose control like this, if he ever has. “I didn’t—I never meant to hurt anyone. Only—” he feels water in his own eyes, and doesn’t bother blinking it away, just swipes at his face with one shirtsleeve. “I couldn’t feel anything, and it was all just—horrible. Everything was horrible. How could I have told you that? How could I possibly have explained it?”

The halting explanation doesn’t seem to land, and after another minute, Lane leans forward and presses his forehead into Lewis’s shoulder.

They’re silent for a little while as Lewis tries to compose himself. Finally, after several minutes, his brother lets out a shaky breath, his voice tremulous and raw when he speaks.

“Do you remember wh—what I promised?”

Lane’s stomach drops. He doesn’t know what his brother is talking about. “What?”

Lewis doesn’t answer right away, just gives a wet sniff.

“Well. You used to do this on the worst nights.” His voice is slowly becoming steadier. “Crawl into bed after Father left for the pub, and put your little head just there.” His fingers brush over Lane’s collar. “Frightened by the dark, I think. Perhaps you’ve forgotten. And you’d say it was only for a minute—that you wouldn’t be a bother. But I’d let you stay until you fell asleep.”

Lane tries to cast his mind back. Everything’s a blur except for the view from what he supposes was their bedroom window. Looking out through the dark windowsill, past the large clotheslines and into next door’s back garden, with a blue-striped something pillowed soft and warm under his cheek.

“I remember that,” he says, voice muffled.

He thinks he does. He wants to. It makes him feel safe, just for a moment.

“Darling boy,” Lewis mumbles, and for a moment, Lane swears he feels his brother lean down and
press a kiss into the back of his hair. Before he can decide if he’s imagined it, the feeling is gone.

They fall silent again, and stand together unmoving for another minute before Lewis shifts his arm as if he wants Lane off, and Lane has to lift his head in order to stand up and get a better look at him.

“God. What a little fool I’ve b—become,” Lewis sniffs, wiping at his red nose and bruised-up face with one sleeve, and Lane’s not sure if he’s referring to the crying or the lump sum put together. But Lewis doesn’t finish the sentence, if there was ever more of it to begin with; he just frowns at something over Lane’s shoulder, jerking his chin toward the object in question.

“What is that?”

Lane glances backwards and spots a colorful lumpy package that’s now drizzling water all over the end table.

“Oh, sorry. I forgot.” An embarrassed flush heats his cheeks. “It, erm—well, it’s for your—” he gestures toward Lewis’s bruised face. “Keep the swelling down.”

Lewis stares at him with an expression Lane can’t quite parse, but extends one hand in a motion that says to bring it over. “Right. Thanks.”

**

“Good god,” says Mark, the second he picks up, “how you must enjoy imagining me suffer! I’ve been waiting for you to phone me for hours; where on earth have you been?”

Lewis opens his mouth to speak, but no sound comes out, not even a whimper. He sags forward on the bed, forearms braced on his knees, praying he won’t have to say the words aloud.

“Well, I suppose you’ve been having all sorts of fun. The bars, the boys; tell me what you’re like.”

“Mark,” Lewis closes his eyes, feels shame crawl along his skin.

In an instant, the playfulness has gone. “Christ. You sound wretched.”

Lewis has to let out a breath through his nose to keep himself composed. “And what do you sound like, then?”

His voice is too flat by half, and cracks halfway through the sentence. Mark doesn’t answer right away. Clearly, he’s noticed.

“Spoken to Lane, have we?”

“Yeah.”

“Right.” A small pause. “So. Worse than you thought?”

Lewis’s eyes fill again, remembering the pain in his brother’s voice. Empty rage crests over him like a wave—he wants to drown in the despair, the terror, the impotent helplessness. You should have been here. You should have done something. You swore to protect him and you nearly let him die.

“I’ve failed him,” he chokes out.
Mark doesn’t say anything.

**

Joan wakes up almost an hour before her usual alarm, and although she thinks briefly about catching another thirty minutes of sleep, she’s too energized to lie awake in bed and think about her to-do list. After two or three minutes, she just gets up, goes through her usual toilette and kisses a sleeping Kevin goodbye before putting a note in the kitchen for her mother.

By the time she’s caught a cab into Midtown and is walking toward the front doors of the office, shaking water from her raincoat and tucking her damp scarf into her pocket, she feels certain there’s a reason this happened. Her hunch is confirmed once she takes out her keys and realizes the door is already unlocked.

Strangely, the office is quiet. She doesn’t see any of the other partners here, or any of the creatives—serial offenders, who have to be reminded about office etiquette every time they work late—but a lamp glows bright in the creative lounge, and the whole floor smells like cigar smoke.

“Hello?” she calls out. Her voice echoes down the corridor and her heels click against the tile as she walks toward the dim light.

It’s certainly a surprise to see Lane’s brother sitting at the round table directly outside her office, puffing away with nothing but a full ashtray in front of him, but he doesn’t ask her what she’s doing here, and she tries not to seem too curious. Joan is nothing if not discreet, and so she keeps her question short.

“Are you late or early?”

Lewis shrugs one shoulder, doesn’t move. His voice is as muted Joan’s ever heard it, but the amused quality still glimmers somewhere in there, very faint. “Feel free to boot me out.”

“Doesn’t bother me.” Joan loosens the tie of her raincoat; puts her briefcase in the chair opposite him before slipping out of the coat and ducking into her doorway to hang it up on the rack. He watches her with tired, bloodshot eyes as she moves back into the light, and rests her hands on the top of the hardback chair.

As she moves into the light, his face comes into clear relief. A blue-purple shiner darkens his left eye and cheek, and there are red scuffs on his forehead and on his knuckles. She’s not sure exactly where to start, so she decides to be direct.

“Did you and Lane get in another fight?”

“No. Got mugged.” Lewis huffs out a low, sad sound, gaze flitting to the side. His voice is brittle. “Getting gossip, are we?”

“Lane mentioned the letter. That’s all.”

“I see.”

He swallows, once, and as he glances back up, and she notices the split-second flicker in his eyes, absorbs the visceral, skin-crawling fear in that single look, Joan understands exactly what’s
happened.

“He told you,” she says simply, and feels a prickle of relief wash over her entire body, like taking the first step into a steaming hot bath. *Oh, thank god.* She sits down in the chair next to him, hard, before she can stop herself.

Lewis’s jaw is strung tight, like he doesn’t trust himself to speak; all he does is nod his head yes, once. Judging by the earlier tableau, Joan knows how he’ll answer her next question, but asks it anyway.

“Are you all right?”

He lets out another laugh that isn’t a laugh; the sound’s so tremulous it makes the hair on the back of Joan’s neck stand on end. When he meets her eyes again, the usual mask is almost gone completely. His eyes are a little too bright; his mouth purses and his jaw tightens again before he answers.

“I’ve been so blind.”

*You were right* echoes just behind it, unbidden.

“Don’t,” Joan begins, but Lewis interrupts her.

“No, now, let’s not start being untruthful. We were doing so well before.”

She glances down at the table, tries to force her tongue to say the words that are lodged in her throat. *We should have paid more attention. It’s not your fault. I wish we could have done something. I wish I hadn’t been so selfish.*

“I couldn’t help him,* she thinks with a sigh.

She grips her lighter in one palm, with a cigarette now poised between her finger and thumb, unlit, and so when Lewis puts a bruised hand over her wrist, covering both of these things from view, it makes Joan jerk her head up in surprise.

His blue eyes bore holes into hers. Joan has to force herself not to look away.

“You have done more than you can possibly imagine.” The soft, intense urgency in his voice makes her feel raw and exposed. “My dear girl—”

Joan blinks back a sudden rush of tears. She hated being teased about her friendship with Lane, before, but she certainly doesn’t want Lewis to talk about it in a serious way now. It only makes her remember the bad things: how cold they were to each other, how alone Lane felt before he tried to die. An unsettled flutter bursts to life in the pit of her stomach, imagining his brother saying all of these impossibly earnest things to her. Things like *thank you* and *I love him* and *you did it.*
"Don’t."

Lewis stops talking; his brows draw down and his mouth hangs open a little.

“I know you’re grateful. I do.” Her hands are shaking. He can probably feel that. “But I’m not the one who—the progress is all him. I was just here. That’s all.”

He pauses for a second, seems to choose his words carefully. “That matters.”

It’s not everything, she thinks suddenly, and her brain grinds to a complete halt as she tries to parse that sentence. Where the hell did that come from?

“It’s not enough,” she finally says.

Somehow, rephrasing the thought just makes this situation worse, but Lewis doesn’t call her on how odd it sounds, or on the way she keeps blinking so rapidly, just releases her hand and sits back in his chair. When he meets her eyes again, the ghost of his usual sardonic smirk is on his face.

“Well,” he says lightly, and taps the side of his nose with one finger, twice, as if they’re sharing a thrilling secret. “Still something, anyway.”

She gives him a wan smile. After a few more seconds, she finally puts the cigarette in her hand up to her lips and lights it. They sit in silence until she’s smoked it almost down to the filter.

“Are you staying in town?” she asks.

He stubs out his last cigar. Nods.

“For a little while longer.”

“Good.” Joan takes a deep, steadying breath. “He’ll like that.”

“Doubtful. But I think I’ll stay, regardless.”

One side of Lewis’s mouth twitches up in a smile, and for the first time, she can see the resemblance between him and Lane, clear as day. She watches self-awareness play across his mouth as he dwells on the idea, and not for the first time, she wonders how long he’s been playing this part. How long he’s been willing to act like the annoying idiot to Lane’s put-upon straight man if it means they don’t have to say how much they love each other. If it means that they don’t lose that connection.

A light flicks on in reception, and suddenly fluorescent lights are buzzing to life all across the office. It’s seven o’clock. Time to start the workday.

Joan and Lewis exchange a look of perfect understanding before she gets to her feet, gathers up her coat, and leaves him to the rest of his cigar.

Time to go.

two weeks later

Lane enters the restaurant a few minutes before his usual time, but notices Myra sitting in their usual booth towards the back. As he makes his way past a waitress balancing an obscene amount of full
glasses on a tray, one-handed, it takes him a moment to realize that although Myra is here, she is not alone, and Lane’s usual spot is taken by a black gentleman in a charcoal-grey suit.

“Oh, Lane.” When Myra looks up, it’s with a sort of guarded expression. Her eyes are wide, as if she didn’t quite expect to see him here. “Hello.”

“Sorry.” Lane glances at the gentleman across from her. This fellow’s handsomely-dressed with very delicate features, sporting an elegant bouffant of thick, wavy hair and a thin mustache. His suit seems to feature some type of houndstooth pattern. For a second, Lane’s almost jealous at how put-together this person seems. Why would he be a patient? “Am I too early?”

“No.” Myra waves one hand at her companion. “This is my husband, Barry. Barry, this is—one of my patients.”

“Ah. How do you do?” Lane reaches over to shake the man’s hand, and feels an absurd surge of pride when he notices his fingers don’t shake at all. “Didn’t realize—well, that you were—you. Actually, I thought you were a patient.”

The man’s lips curl into a polite smile.

“Nope. Just having lunch.” He turns back to his wife. Lane is amused and surprised to see a flush of color come into Myra’s cheeks. “But, I should probably get back to work, if you’ve got things to discuss.”

“Okay, baby,” she says. “I’ll see you at home.”

Barry sets cash onto the table, then gets up, puts on his coat and hat, and squeezes Myra’s hand with an affectionate look before making his goodbyes, and walking away.

As Lane settles in, and shoves his coat into the corner of the booth, he can’t help but muse over this new bit of information. He doesn’t recall her ever mentioning a husband, unless she had said it to him in the very beginning, and he just hasn’t remembered since.

“I didn’t know you were married.”

Myra lifts one shoulder in a shrug. Quickly, she pulls her wedding band off, threads it onto a delicate chain already hanging around her neck, and redoes the clasp. Her ring is now lying next to the gold figure pendant on her necklace. Lane can’t see what it is from so far away, but it appears to have wings.

“Four years. I try not to mention it in my sessions.”

“Why? Do the other patients get jealous, or something?”

“Interesting way of putting it.” She holds her hand out for his journal, and he quickly reaches into his jacket pocket to give the scuffed black notebook to her. “Let’s see what’s on your mind this month.”

The waitress comes and takes his order, and by the time a steaming cup of tea and a fresh black coffee have been delivered, Myra’s already perused most of the recent pages.

“Saw an ex-girlfriend recently, huh?”

Lane freezes with his mug halfway to his mouth. Happily, his hand stays steady in this position. He’s starting to get more motor control back.
“Oh. Well, yes. Couple of weeks ago, I suppose.”

He has a vague memory of running into two girls in a doorway, and feeling horribly embarrassed, afterward. Perhaps that was it.

“How did that go?”

The mug wobbles slightly in the air. He takes a quick sip of his tea, and then sets it aside before he can drop it.

“You know. It’s always rubbish. And Lewis was nosy. She was—polite, I think, but distant.” A flash of light reflecting off the mirror at the counter brings another memory to the forefront—a detail he’d forgotten. “And she had a wedding band. Or maybe just a diamond. Something like that. I remember being surprised.”

“By the fact that she was married?”

“Not so much that.” Lane pursed his mouth, tried to search for the right words. “Here, let me see what I wrote. I’m sure there’s something else I’ve forgotten.”

Myra hands him the journal, already turned to the correct page. In a thick, messy scrawl, he’d written several sentences about the encounter:

…looked at me with such pity, it was just awful. And she brought up the last time we spoke, which put Lewis in a state. He and I had a row, afterward. I panicked. Migraine later.

“Hm.” Lane studies this paragraph for a couple of seconds before putting the journal aside, back between them on the table. “Well. I suppose I was just upset because nothing had changed for me, really.”

Myra makes a skeptical face. “Your entire life has changed.”

Lane shakes his head no. “I don’t mean—the the breakdown, or whatever. The status of my life. I’m working at the same company, in the same position. I’m not married, although I wasn’t when she and I were together. Or—or I don’t think I was, perhaps that was before Becca sent the papers, but after she’d gone to London. The first time. Anyway. Toni was—much younger. A—waitress at a, erm,” he cleared his throat, “popular gentleman’s club. Just starting out, and all the rest.”

A grin spreads across Myra’s face. “Oh, really?”

“Shush!” Lane ignores the devious gleam in her eyes. “What I mean is, if she’s married, she could very well be in a completely new position. She could have a family, or a mansion, or a starlet’s apartment on—on the—Broadway. That’s the theater district here. Not the West End.”

“Correct,” Myra confirms.

“Toni wanted to be a stage actress.” A surge of pride courses through Lane’s chest as he remembers this. “Like Nichelle Nichols, before she did Star Trek.”

“Hang on. She was a colored girl?”

“Mm.”

Myra looks delighted. “Okay, well, we’re definitely coming back to that, but I want you to try and complete the initial thought you had, about the meeting and her new position. Try to circle back. Use
the last couple of words as clues. Broadway.”

“All right. Erm. What was I saying about that? Theater, er, distillery. No, district. Oh! The part I meant to tell you was that she’d moved on. Married, happy, what have you.” Lane unrolled his silverware from the napkin with an absurd flourish. “And I’m afraid I’ve stayed rather the same. Even after all this time.”

“Hm.” Myra steeples her hands together as she absorbs the words.

The pride Lane felt earlier is slowly eaten away by concern as he watches her study his face, her expression solemn and serene.

“Would you want to get married again?” she asks.

“Certainly not. I’d never take Becca back now.”

She grins at him. “I didn’t think you would, and I’m glad to hear you say it. But that’s not what I asked.”

“You asked if I wanted to be married again,” Lane argues. “Who else would take me in this state, if not an ex-wife?”

“Plenty of people get married a second time,” Myra says, very slowly, as if she’s trying to lead him toward a conclusion that ought to be obvious. “Or a third, or fourth. Why shouldn’t you expect to have a girlfriend, or a wife, or more children, if that’s what you want?”

“Children?” Lane scoffs, and nearly bursts out laughing. “God, I think that’s a bit much, isn’t it?”

“Is it so impossible? You’re still in your forties.”

“Well—you said it yourself! I already have a child—a teenage child. And given the trouble we had there, even if I did want more of them, there are still certain symptoms which preclude the getting of the children, if you understand my point.”

Everything in the southern hemisphere had been soft as raw dough ever since the incident, and considering how hellish the past few weeks had been, Lane had very little interest in trying to change that. He hadn’t even thought about the absence of sex, really, which probably showed how much he’d missed it. Or how much he’d had before. Either way, the lacking of it was clearly not his biggest problem for now.

“I didn’t realize that was still an issue,” Myra made a quick note on her legal pad, as if he was just telling her about the food allergies again. “Good to know.”

“Oh. Well, I don’t know why I bloody bother telling you about it,” Lane groused. Not like she could give him anything to fix it. Even if he wanted to fix it. Right now, he’s honestly not sure it matters much. Who’d want to sleep with some forgetful old coot? “Anyway, children are right out.”

“For now,” Myra winks at him.

He rolls his eyes. “Oh, whatever.” As his gaze lands on a bit of newspaper, folded and sitting nearly where the booth meets the wall, Lane decides to glance through it, attempting to find something more interesting to discuss than his complete lack of a personal life.

“Oh, look,” he says brightly, as if it’s all just some hilarious joke, “there’s a Marilyn Monroe double feature playing through next week.”
Myra just laughs. “You like her, huh?”

Lane shrugs. At this point, he’d probably say he liked Eleanor Roosevelt just as well, because at least she’d have interesting Churchill stories to tell him. And they could have tea with President Roosevelt.

“Yes, ha, ha, ha. I’m sure Lewis shall be dragging me to this delightful event very shortly.”

“All right. Let’s move on,” says Myra as the waitress approaches their table with a tray full of lunch specials on robin’s egg-blue plates.

**

After lunch, Joan spends an hour going over some drafted tactical briefs for Dow, layering in campaign-specific budget information into the pages in slow, careful script, and so when someone knocks on her door and she glances up to see Lane standing there, she’s pleasantly surprised by the interruption.

“How was lunch?” she asks. If she’s got the day right, he had another session.

“Oh, you mean, with Myra? Very good. Lots of conversation today.”

“Well, I’m glad.” Joan gestures for him to take a seat. “Stay a few minutes, if you want. I’m not busy.”

He ambles inside, shuts the door behind him, and takes a seat in one of the blue chairs, twinkling at her in such a contented way it makes her sigh out a breath of relief. When he looks this happy, it’s easy to believe that everything between them can eventually go back to normal. Or at least some version of normal that doesn’t always involve hospitals and doctors.

“Aren’t you going to ask what we discussed?”

She gives him a puzzled look. He’s never indicated that he wants to share the details of these sessions with her, so she keeps her answer careful, but positive.

“If you want to talk about it, we can.”

“Ex-girlfriends,” says Lane with a mischievous look.

Joan’s mouth falls open. A pang of awkwardness bubbles up into her stomach, and makes her shift uncomfortably in her chair. “Oh.”

He waves a hand through the air in a distracted way, as if this topic is nothing special. “Ran into one of mine a few weeks ago. Only reason it came up.”

“Well, that was probably awkward.”

“Very.” Lane lets out a short, sharp laugh, but he doesn’t start talking right away, just settles back into his chair, and regards her with a cocked eyebrow. “What do you think?”

She’s completely floored. “About what?”
“Oh. Perhaps I didn’t finish the whole story.” Lane smiles as he says this, but doesn’t quite look at her. “Myra asked me if I wanted to get married again. I mean, it’s just—ridiculous, isn’t it?”

“Is it?” she asks.

He makes a bemused face, like she just said something idiotic.

Joan shrugs, and glances down at her datebook as if she’s going to open it. Briskly, she picks up a pen, and pretends to be poised to fill in the day and time. “Maybe my invitation got lost in the mail. Where’s your reception?”

“Hilarious.” Lane snorts out a derisive noise. “She’s already married, thank you very much.”

Smirking, she tosses the pen back onto her calendar. “I thought they were just engaged?”

“No. Married several years, I think. Saw the husband and everything. Very nice-looking chap.”

With that, Lane gets up, and wanders over to the glass wall.

“Hm.” Joan watches as he begins inspecting some of the ads and illustrations she’s taped up. She wonders for the millionth time why he would want her input on something so intensely personal. He used to hate when she butted in about his romantic life, even before he and Rebecca divorced. “Was that why the topic came up?”

“Probably. Unless she thought I’d—you know, asked for Toni’s hand, or whatever.”

“Really? Things were that serious?”

Joan doesn’t ever remember hearing about an ex-girlfriend named Toni, let alone one who almost got a ring on her finger.

“If I remember correctly, I was very serious about her. But I don’t think she was. And I don’t think I ever got up the nerve to ask.” Lane traces the edges of an impressionist postcard as he talks. “Or if I did—Father didn’t approve. So the whole thing fell through, in the end. And—I suppose I went back to Becca, at that point. Details are a bit fuzzy.”

“Oh.” Joan’s stomach clenches at the idea of Lane giving up on love because his father disapproved. “Honey, that’s terrible.”

Lane huffs out a noise of agreement, and ducks his head as he keeps talking.

“It’s not that I—want to be alone, you know.”

Joan doesn’t say anything.

“I just keep wondering if anyone would even—want me, after all this.”

She bites down on the tongue that wants to say of course you’ll find someone. You could find someone in a second.

“Why wouldn’t they?”

Lane turns to face her, and although he doesn’t sit down, Joan suddenly feels like he’s sitting right next to her. Her pulse hammers in her throat and her face is hot and she doesn’t understand why the atmosphere in the room has become so loaded, and why he’s staring at her as if this one plain little statement is worth half the poetry in the world.
“You’re always so kind to me.”

Joan rolls her eyes, and a little laugh escapes her lips before she can stop herself. On some level, he’s probably complimenting her to dodge the first question, but the sentiment is nice to hear, even if it’s a lie.

“That’s not true.”

“Yes, it is.”

Their gazes lock. She forces herself not to look away, or crack a stupid joke.

“No matter what’s going on, you’re just—there. And you give me an honest opinion, even when it’s difficult. It’s—I don’t know what I’ve ever done to deserve it, but I—I’m glad to have that kind of friend in my life. And I’ve—missed this, lately.”

The earnest words wash over her like warm sunshine, filling her up with an easy, relaxed feeling, and for a second, Joan is so thankful she can hardly speak. All she can say, when she finally finds her composure, is:

“I’ve missed it, too.”

Lane’s answering smile lights up his entire face.

Before things can get too awkward, Joan motions for him to sit back down, reaching for a couple of thick file folders that await her attention.

“Want to help decide which metrics I should bring to my dinner with Dow?”

“Oh, is that coming up?” Lane’s mouth purses in an intrigued way as he returns to his chair. “Well, let’s have a look.”

**

“You know, these chaps really ought to run off sooner,” Lewis mutters to Lane in the dark of the ancient theater. Onscreen, Jack Lemmon flits about the dance floor in a sequined dress, tangoing beautifully with Joe E. Brown. “Daphne’s a bit of a slut. He’ll do all right with the pervy old man.”

“Stop talking. You are ruining the comedy.”

Lewis grins to himself in the dark as Marilyn comes back onscreen, necking with Tony Curtis as if she’s going to eat his entire face off. When they finally come up for air – Tony looking bloody gorgeous with those puffed-up lips, the minx – she gives him some patent line about her bedroom skills. All innocence, naturally.

Oh, I used to sell kisses for the milk fund!

God, the straights are such morons when it comes to sex. A woman like her could flash a bit of thigh, get the chap off, and then rob him blind before anyone realized anything was the matter. Lewis tips back his flask for another drink. After a long pull, he offers the flask to Lane. His brother doesn’t take it – doesn’t drink nearly as much as he used to, honestly – but when Lewis glances over, it’s clear Lane is absorbed in the nuances of Ms. Monroe’s performance, staring at the woman with a glazed,
open-mouthed gawp.

“You dirty wanker,” Lewis mutters into his brother’s ear.

“Oh, shut up.”

Lane shoves the bucket of popcorn at Lewis' head with a noise of disgust, which showers him in kernels. In retaliation, Lewis tosses a handful of popcorn back at his brother and relishes the frustrated groan this produces.

“Augh, now there's butter on my jacket, you nitwit!”

Someone near the back shushes them. Probably interfering with a hideously premature climax, if the heavy breathing back there is to be believed.

With a humming sound, Lewis picks up the flask from where it's fallen on the sticky cinema floor, then takes out a handkerchief and dusts himself and the canteen off. A piece of corn falls from his shoulder onto the back of his hand. He pops this into his mouth with a smirk, and turns his attention back to the screen.

**

Pale morning sunshine filters through the hotel curtains, warming the cozy room in all its bland colors, and playing gently across the thick, tangled blankets.

Lane’s sitting up in the middle of this messy bed, his back against the headboard, and Joan’s on top of him, hot and tight and wet and perfect, with her long red hair falling round her bare shoulders in messy curls.

His hands are under her white bikini top—the only article of clothing she’s currently wearing—and as he touches her, she makes a high-pitched noise that goes straight to his cock. He thrusts up fast to hear it again; Joan jerks her hips forward in response. In his arms, she’s strawberries and cream, her lovely face and chest flushed a patchy, picturesque pink. Wordlessly, Lane urges her on, and unties her top before his hands slide down to grip her hips. Her palms trail over his stomach and up to his shoulders as she rides him faster and harder, soft moans escaping from her parted lips—oh, god Lane, yes, yes, yes!

Lane wakes with a start in the pitch dark of his bedroom, clutching his pillow to his chest with both arms as he ruts against it. His mattress creaks under him, and he’s soaked with sweat, but he’s already kicking the covers and pillow aside to grasp himself in one hand, desperate for release.

A few quick strokes and he comes so hard his entire body strains with the effort. His head tips back onto the mattress, and his hand falls away to the sheets as he stares at the dark ceiling and tries to catch his breath. Spots dance in front of his face. My god. Oh, my god. What the hell was that about?

As the pleasure ebbs, the usual jumble of anxious thoughts threatens to take its place. After another few moments of indulgence, Lane sits up, wipes his stomach and palms with the sheet, and skins off his pajamas, along with the pants. Fumbling around on the nightstand for his glasses, he tosses the lot into the floor, and crosses to the door to pull on his bathrobe.
Once he’s decent, Lane throws the comforter on the floor in a separate pile, strips the bed with military precision, and takes up the linens and the other clothes under one arm.

He tries not to feel too guilty about this turn of events, but his stomach flip-flops with anxiety despite his best efforts. Hasn't thought about women in months, so of course he'd lose his head just when he’d decided any semblance of a sex drive was a lost cause. And of course he’d dream about Joan.

But why now—after all this time?

As Lane creeps down the hall and into the pitch-dark sitting room, he stubs his toe on what feels like the leg of the coffee table, and promptly drops half his dirty laundry into the floor.

“Augh! Damn it!”

He fumbles around on hands and knees for a few seconds, quickly gathers up the fallen articles, and makes his way through the kitchen and into the laundry room without further incident. In a flash, he flips on the light switch, opens the machine, and finds the correct box of detergent on the nearest shelf. The green one. After faffing about water temperature for upwards of a minute, he starts the cycle on hot and throws the lot into the top-loading machine. Oh, sod it all.

Far down the hallway, the door to Nigel’s room creaks open, and footsteps begin padding down the corridor. Lane winces at the sound as he pours a rattling stream of soap flakes into the machine. How on earth is that idiot already awake?

Behind Lane, now in the doorway, Lewis clears his throat.

“You're up early.”

Lane takes care not to look at him, painfully aware of the mess on his linens and on himself.

“Just tidying,” he mutters, as he pours a few more soap flakes inside the machine for good measure, then closes the lid. “Is that all right?”

His brother arches a knowing eyebrow, and for half a second, Lane feels like he’s twelve again, facing down an entire dormitory of boys who all know what he’s been doing in the showers, and who are all secretly laughing at him.

“What?” he huffs.

They stare awkwardly at each other for a moment.

“Well, I'm off to the head,” Lewis says brightly into the silence. With that, he turns on one heel, and marches away down the hall.

Lane sighs, not sure if his overwhelming relief stems from not being caught or is just plain gratitude for his brother's usual amount of lunacy.

“Thank you ever so much for sharing that.”

Chapter End Notes
Poor Lane's got to have whiplash by now, with all the different stressors popping up to ruin his routine. But as wrenching as the initial conversation with Lewis was, I think they absolutely had to have it in some capacity. Otherwise Lane could never really admit the root of the problem, let alone try to move forward - whether he's successful or not. And Lewis could never really understand just how dire the situation really was.

Also, I love that his relationship with Joan becomes so much more straightforward when he's not angsting about how much he's in love with her/how much he wants her. Bless. He's so awkward that I thought he'd be much more confident talking to her when he didn't think sex would be an issue. So I went ahead and burst that bubble. I'm so evil. :)

Hopefully it'll be a much shorter wait between updates. I mean it this time...
“Well, I think that’s all the questions I had today.”

Sitting at the expansive conference room table in Tony Blake’s Romanesque financial offices, Joan glances at her wristwatch and uncrosses her legs as subtly as she can. Although she and Tony have done a lot of business together over the past eight months, letting down her guard with him, even for a second, still seems awkward.

“Okay. So, there’s just one more thing.” Tony closes the folder containing their latest contract, noting the new investments she and Lane had discussed. He scratches the top of his hand before folding one palm over the other. His pallid face widens into a pained smile, emphasizing his round, sanguine cheeks and bulbous nose. “And I’ll be straight with you here. Joan, I’m not going to be representing your account anymore.”

She blinks at him, completely floored.

“What?”

“Listen, it’s not you,” he says quickly. Which, of course, means that it is her, but she still doesn’t understand. What in god’s name has she ever done to offend him, or the other partners, or the board of directors? Why would he throw away a working relationship with no warning? “Carl is gonna do such a great job for you guys. I just—well, let’s just say it’s for personal reasons. That’s all.”

Before Joan’s better instincts can kick in, and before he can deliver the rest of this planned little breakup speech, she’s already streamrolling right over him.

“I’m sorry. Are you leaving the firm?”

“No.”

“Then have I done something to offend you?”

“What? Oh, no, honey, of course not.”

“Don’t call me honey.”

“Crap.” The back of his neck suddenly glows so pink that he looks sunburned. “Sorry. I mean, that’s not what I meant at—”

“Is it because I took over the management of this account?”

Because he’d rather deal with Cooper? Or Lane? Another man, obviously?

“No!” He clears his throat. His eyes skitter away from hers. “Not exactly…”

“Tony, you listen to me. If you have a problem with the way I do business—” Joan has no idea where this is coming from, words are pouring out of her mouth like venom from a snake’s fangs as she rises smoothly to her feet “—then you can tell Carl he’s got one less customer to worry about. Why don’t you take that portfolio and shove it where the FDIC can’t—”
"Will you quit yelling?" he finally snaps. "I’m taking myself off the account because I like you. Okay?"

Joan’s mouth is still open, but no words are coming out. She quickly closes it.

He huffs out a bitter laugh as he hides his eyes behind one hand. "That’s why I gave Carl the account. I didn’t want you to think, you know, that it was anything unprofessional. Jesus. I was gonna be real smooth. Wait until you left today, and then call you up, and ask you to dinner. That way, even if you didn’t say yes, we didn’t have to—you wouldn’t have to worry about running into each other."

The rest of her angry tirade deflates inside her chest like a popped Macy’s Thanksgiving Day balloon.

“Oh.”

Very slowly, she lowers herself back down into her chair. God, she is such a moron. As the seconds tick by, Joan cannot fathom how she misread this situation so badly. She’s certain she hasn’t been this wrong about a man since her junior year in college, when the professor she was dating dumped her out of the blue, and turned out to be married with a wife and kids living twenty miles away.

Tony raises his head, and one glance shows that his face is almost fire engine red. “So, uh. Carl—he’s a nice guy.”

“Sure,” she says faintly. At that specific moment, she probably couldn’t pick Carl out of a police lineup.

“Listen, I don’t want you to think that I don’t respect you or the way you do business, because I do. Joan, you’re one hell of a woman. I’m not saying that just for cheap flattery. I really mean it.”

Joan actually grins, and when she glances back at Tony, his eyes have widened in a hopeful way.

“Least I got you to laugh.”

“Don’t count your chickens.” Despite her best efforts, her mouth twitches into another wide smile. “You did all of this because you have feelings for me?”

“Feelings.” He snorts out a breath. “If you want to put it that way, yeah. But I meant what I said before. I do like you. I think you’re amazing. And I just, uh, want to get to know you better.”

“That’s it?”

He gives her a stiff smile. “That’s it.”

Joan folds her hands on her lap, one over the other, tracing her thumb over a vein in her wrist as she considers what she wants to say first. When she glances up, she meets his eyes immediately and without hesitation.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you.”

“Yeah?” he asks.

“Yes.” Joan smiles at him this time. Jitters of anticipation buzz over her skin, and in a split second, she makes her decision. “You can take me to dinner, if you’d still like that.”

His round face lights up, and for a second, Joan feels the heady, familiar rush of excitement she used
to get when a nice-looking man would ask her out.

“You mean it?”

“Why not?” she says, and offers him another, more genuine smile.

“Oh, that’s great. Okay.” He lets out a deep breath, and then another. Relief is pouring off of him in waves. “Well. Uh. Let’s set a date. And then I guess I’ll walk you over to Carl’s office.”

“Okay,” Joan says, and gets out her personal book.

**

When she gets back to the office, Joan pours a huge dram of brandy directly into the nearest glass. Just as she’s fumbling to replace the bottle cap, the back door opens, and standing in the throughway is Dawn, with a job file under one arm.

“Oh, Joan! I’m sorry, I thought you were at lunch.”

“No,” sighs Joan, but there must be some kind of shadow on her face, because Dawn narrows her eyes, glances down at the brandy bottle, and then back to Joan.

“You’re drinking this early in the morning?”

God, the judgment in her voice! After a second of thought, Joan pushes an empty glass in Dawn’s direction, and leans against her desk drawers so the secretary can get in and pour herself a drink without knocking over anything important. Dawn obviously gets the hint, because she pulls an intrigued face, shuts the door behind her, and sets the job file on the floor before crossing to the bar.

Joan decides to start talking while Dawn’s still got her back turned. For some reason, it’s easier to tell if she doesn’t have to see the surprise bloom over the other woman’s face like an open sunflower.

“Tony Blake asked me out to dinner.”

The crunch of ice cubes being scraped out of their bowl is obvious, especially once Dawn’s hand stills and the silence becomes potent. But the other girl still doesn’t comment, just starts scooping up ice again as if Joan didn’t say a word.

“He’ll take himself off the account, of course.” As if Joan wouldn’t have considered the offer otherwise. Ten years ago—maybe even five—she wouldn’t have given it a second thought before saying yes. “It was just unexpected.”

Dawn is obviously trying to keep her voice neutral. “But it’s a bad thing?”

“I don’t know,” says Joan, and truly, she doesn’t. She was excited in the moment, once they’d gotten past the misunderstandings, but after meeting Carl and during the long cab ride back to the office, the excitement had morphed into a slick anxiety, as if she were expecting an urgent phone call with bad news instead of looking forward to a pleasant evening out.

“Well. I guess it doesn’t really matter unless you like him.”

Joan doesn’t suppress her eyeroll this time. “Really?”
“I don’t mean to pry, of course.” Dawn turns around. Her glass has no liquor in it, and a miniature bottle of club soda now sits open next to the rest of the tall glass bottles. That girl is so strange.

Well, they’ve come this far. Joan might as well tell her the truth.

“He’s sweet. I could like him. That’s not the point.”

She’s spent almost an hour mulling this over. Tony is thoughtful and kind, if a little reserved. And although he’s not stylish or important, he’s nice-looking, and educated, and seems to appreciate her for more than her cup size. He’s certainly not someone worth writing off. Plenty of people don’t like each other right away. Sometimes it takes time to get to know them. And if the physical chemistry is there, there’s no reason to get amped up over whether she wants to doodle his name in a notebook from minute one.

“Isn’t it?” Dawn asks, with a suspicious look.

“Some of us are a little more adventurous than others,” Joan says crisply.

Dawn’s mouth tightens. Joan decides not to push the envelope much further. As much as she doesn’t like being condescended to, she does need to discuss this with someone. Even if, tragically, the conversation is with someone who doesn’t quite understand the bigger picture.

“Anyway, I’m not sure if it’s a good idea in this specific case,” Joan continues. “For the obvious reasons.”

A wistful part of her desperately wants to discuss this with Lane, but Joan quashes that thought immediately. You can’t tell him, so don’t bother.

But why can’t she tell him? The pulsing gut feeling that accompanies this idea is so insidiously uncomfortable that Joan isn’t even sure if she can voice it without sounding like a fool. Because it would make him upset. He’d be disappointed in her. She’s not tiptoeing around his feelings because of February; she just knows that’s the logical outcome. He doesn’t like when people mix business and pleasure; he sees it as irresponsible. Years ago, he didn’t like it when men in the office were supposedly looking at her instead of concentrating on their jobs.

I understand all men are dizzy and powerless to refuse you…

“So you said no.”

But you’re not people. You’re his friend, and he’s yours. Why can’t you tell him?

Joan shakes her head; the gesture is so minute her earrings barely sway from side to side. She quickly takes another drink.

“You said yes?”

“He was very thoughtful,” she says, defensively.

When she glances back at Dawn, the younger woman is studying her with narrowed eyes, as if she’s just figured out something important, but isn’t quite sure how to voice it.

“Have you made many friends since you and your husband…?”

Joan huffs out a stunned noise, and turns a warning glare on the other woman. Years ago, this kind of look would have sent even experienced secretaries running for the hills. Today, not even close.
Dawn just lifts her chin and meets Joan’s imperious gaze without hesitation.

“Because I could understand why you’d be nervous, if that were the case.”

“For god’s sake, Dawn. I’m not a twelve-year old,” Joan hisses, too rankled to be anything but blunt. “This isn’t my first rodeo.”

The secretary actually grins. Suddenly, all the crackling tension in the air is gone. It feels less like Dawn is sizing Joan up and more like the girl’s just too prudish to say whatever’s really on her mind.

“No one said it was. You do look a little pale, though.”

“I can’t believe you actually asked me that.” Joan thinks she understands Dawn’s line of questioning now. Dawn thinks she’s spooked. Divorced and almost forty and scared to dip a toe back into the water, at least where it counts.

The other door opens; Joan almost jumps out of her skin when she cranes her neck to see who it is, and spies Lane standing in the doorway with a thin manila folder gripped in one hand.

“Oh.” He cocks an eyebrow at the two of them, plainly intrigued. “Sorry. Am I interrupting?”

“Hi, Mr. Pryce,” says Dawn with a gentle smile. “We’ll be just another minute.”

Dear god. Joan makes an apologetic face at him in lieu of explaining why Dawn’s here with a glass in her hand. He probably thinks they’re six sheets to the wind.

“I’ll come find you once we’re done,” she tells him.

“Well. There’s really no hurry. Whenever you’re finished.”

Lane’s practically twinkling as he closes the door, and for the millionth time today, Joan wonders why she’s so unwilling to tell him the truth. He’s going to want to know why she and Dawn are drinking at eleven A.M. For god’s sake, he’s definitely going to see that the account changed hands. What the hell is she supposed to tell Lane instead? That Tony just doesn’t like them? That he’s an idiot? That he’s quitting?

Joan stands up, drains her glass, and wipes the corners of her mouth with two fingers—careful not to muss her lipstick—before she sets her glass back onto the wooden bar cart.

“You should probably go. I have a meeting.”

“Okay,” Dawn sets her club soda onto the hardwood. The glass clicks gently against the polished surface. “Well, whatever you decide, I’m sure it’ll be just fine.”

“Hmph. Thanks.”

Joan isn’t sure if this is meant to be a facetious thank you or if it’s actually sincere, but she doesn’t have time to dwell on the subtext, because Dawn says goodbye and slips out of the room before Joan can even get the rest of her scrambled brain back together.

**
Lane’s lying on the sofa in his office, facing the unlocked door, as Joan lies next to him. Smirking, she strokes one hand across the front of his open trousers, and quickly divests him of the rest of his layers. With one teasing finger, she traces up the underside of his bare, hot cock from root to tip, which makes him squirm against her touch.

“Ah!”

“Tell me when it feels good,” she murmurs as she begins to stroke him in earnest, her playful sinuous voice curling and licking into every part of his body and sending shivers down his legs. It feels wonderful. All he can do is curl up into her side. His hands grip the blousy sleeves of her summer dress and his face is buried in her neck.

“It—it,” oh, god, he can barely speak, her caresses are so impossibly wicked. Her low, knowing voice, the sure touch of her hand—the fact that someone could walk in on them at any moment! “’S too much, ‘m gonna—”

Sweet perfume and clean shampoo and the sweat of her overwhelm the last of his senses. Without warning, he comes all over her hand with a bitten-back cry.

Seconds later, Lane snaps awake in the dark, facedown on the mattress with the top sheet knotted around his waist and a very obvious wet spot dampening his right hip. Oh, damn it.

This time, he’s less careful about stripping the bed, and throws everything into a messy pile a couple of feet away from the bedroom door: sheets, mattress cover, blankets, whatever. He skins off his pajamas on his way to the door, kicks them into the pile, and then picks everything up to take it to the wash.

He’s so annoyed he even leaves his robe untied during the walk over. If Lewis is awake, it’s his own fault for seeing things he shouldn’t.

Lane grumbles about his rotten luck all the way back to the machines, sets the water on hot, slings in a scoop of detergent and tosses the linens into the basket with a growl.

As he turns to leave, and ties his robe firmly around his middle, Lane realizes that there’s a light now blazing in the kitchen, illuminating the dining room table and the side of the long countertop.

He pads out of the laundry room and discovers his brother sitting at the head of the table in a thick red quilted robe. Lewis is rumpled and bleary-eyed, with pillow creases still lining one side of his face. He’s wearing his bifocals, which is shocking enough – thinks they make him look ancient – but what’s truly baffling is that he’s leafing through a jewelry catalog.

“You’re keeping very tidy,” Lewis says without looking up. A fresh mug of tea steeps at his right hand.

Lane flushes pink, and decides to tell a bit of a white lie.

“Oh. Erm. Couldn’t remember if I’d, er, washed them or not.”

Judging by Lewis’s raised eyebrow, his brother doesn’t seem to believe this, but doesn’t dispute it, just flips to the next page of the catalog. Lane peers more closely at the cover. As far as he can tell without his glasses, it appears to be the usual illustrations: various types of glamorous lipsticked women sporting colorful outfits and diamond accessories.

“Why on earth are you looking at that?”
“Very simple.” Lewis flips to the next page, and quickly folds down the corner, as if he’s seen something he likes. “Getting Mark a gift.”

“No, you aren’t,” Lane scoffs immediately, and waves one hand at the catalog’s cover, thankful that the joke is so obvious. If he really did have to talk about Lewis buying his flatmate some sort of expensive lover’s gift, he might well throw himself off the roof. “That’s all—ladies’ things.”

His brother makes a noncommittal noise. “Nonsense. Plenty of chaps like a handsome diamond bracelet.”

Lane knows better to take the man seriously when he’s in such a sardonic mood, and goes to refill the kettle. Only once he replaces the kettle on the stove, and returns to the table, does Lewis even bother to look up. He peers at Lane over the wire rims of his bifocals and cocks one eyebrow in an amused way.

“Peeping out, aren’t we, darling?”

“What? Why didn’t you—?” Lane glances down in a panic before he realizes he’s perfectly decent, and snaps his head back up to glare at Lewis. “Oh, that is not funny, you—utter ass!”

“Can’t believe you fell for that one,” his brother says with a smirk. “Now tell me honestly, what do you think of this brooch? Too modern?”

“Oh, no one cares,” Lane huffs, and sinks into a nearby chair.

**

“Joanie, are you even listening to me?”

Joan snaps to attention, embarrassed to be caught daydreaming, and meets her mother’s inquisitive gaze across the breakfast table.

“What?”

Her mother snorts out a laugh over the rim of her coffee mug. “Let me guess. It’s about a boy.”

Joan makes a disgusted face. “Mom.”

“I a boy!” Kevin interrupts brightly, before Joan can say another word. His tiny, still-clumsy fingers wrap around each Cheerio with laser-like determination as he brings fistfuls of dry cereal up to his mouth. Although he only ends up eating about a quarter of the Cheerios on his tray, his coordination is improving every day. God, he’s getting so big. Where did her tiny little baby go?

“Yes, you are a boy.” Joan scrunches up her nose and leans in to kiss his hair with a playful growl. Kevin squeals and gurgles in wordless delight. “You’re my favorite boy. And Mama is going to eat that yummy cereal right up.”

“Noooooo, Mama. Mine!”

Kevin immediately goes back to his breakfast.

Mom waits until Joan takes another sip of tea before she resumes her line of questioning. “So what’s
“Is he ugly?” her mother asks.

“No, he’s not ugly.” Joan taps short red nails against the table before clarifying, for everyone’s benefit. “It’s probably just—” she glances right, and lowers her voice “—I don’t think one night is worth upsetting anyone over.”

Her mother frowns at her. “Who the hell would it upset?”

“No one,” Joan sighs. “Jesus. I’m just overthinking things.”

“Heheus,” Kevin echoes through a mouthful of dry cereal, then giggles when he sees their surprised expressions, flailing his arms like this is the best joke in the world. Soggy Cheerios spray across his tray.

Joan winces, and reaches out with her napkin to wipe cereal mush off of one of his hands.

“Well, if you don’t want to sleep with the man, then don’t bother going,” her mother says archly. One of her plastic curlers unrolls out of her hair and falls onto the lineoleum with a plink! “You know and I know there’s no use forcing it.”

“Thanks for the free advice,” Joan says flatly. She glances over at the clock. Almost seven thirty. “I should get dressed.”

**

“What does this say? Eleven?”

Joan peers across the desk at the invoice Lane’s waving at her. Right Guard, September, and there’s a strange brown spot next to the top of the subtotal column, which has warped the paper near the right corner, just beside the last two invoice numbers.

“Yes,” she says after a minute, “but I think it’s smudged, so don’t feel bad.”

“Oh, is it?” He squints at the pages, then shakes his head, and puts them aside, reaching for his legal pad to write down some kind of notation. “Didn’t notice.”

“You need to get your eyes checked,” she says with a snort.
Lane grins. It’s another one of their inside jokes. She’d forgotten her own glasses, one day, and had made a fairly egregious typo on one of the spreadsheets as a result. Naturally, he’d made some deadpan remark, and she’d laughed so hard she snorted water out of her nose.

“Don’t think so. Obviously, I’ve got perfect vision.”

Someone knocks, and the door opens within seconds; standing there is Scarlett, with a puzzled expression on her face.

“Sorry to interrupt. Mr. Blake wants to speak with you.”

Joan’s heart drops into her stomach.

“Oh. Well, I—I’ll call back in a little while. We’re just finishing invoices.”

“No, he’s not on the phone,” Scarlett says slowly, and glances back over her left shoulder. Before Joan can react, she hears footsteps moving toward them, and after another second, Tony peers around the doorway.

“Thought I’d drop by, say hello. I was just at lunch in the St. Regis.”

“My goodness.” Lane’s voice booms with excitement. The butterflies in Joan’s stomach turn into a swarm as Tony steps into the room and the two men shake hands. “Well, you’re always very welcome.”

“Thanks.” Tony grins at Lane, and then at Joan; his eyes soften noticeably as she meets his gaze. “Got a minute to talk?”

“Of course.” Lane seems oblivious. “Would you like anything to drink?”

Joan glances over, takes in Lane’s broad grin and his carefree demeanor with mounting panic as he gets up and walks over to the credenza. How is she going to explain this? How is she going to tell him?

“What? Oh, no, thanks. Full up from lunch.” Tony winks at Joan, who almost flushes red under the attention.

“Ah! That can be a problem, yes.” Lane doesn’t seem to have noticed the tension in the room. He returns to his seat, still as chipper as before. “Now. We weren’t scheduled to meet today, were we?”

“No, no,” Tony assures him. “I just came by to chat about some restaurants.” He clears his throat, and turns to Joan again, with a more expectant look. “Joan, do you have a little time now?”

“I can make time, if that’s all right,” Joan says helplessly, as she casts apologetic look back at Lane. His brow is furrowed in confusion; she can practically see the gears turning in his head as he glances back and forth between them. Oh, god. Please don’t ask any questions. Please don’t say anything stupid. She clears her throat, and turns back to Tony. “Why don’t you have Scarlett show you to my office? We can talk there.”

“Sorry. Hang on. This isn’t—you mean you’re not—talking about the portfolio?”

A light of understanding has dawned in Tony’s face.

“No.” He clears his throat. “I, uh, actually gave up the account. Um. Joan, if you don’t mind, I think I will have your girl take me over.”
“Sure,” Joan says faintly, waving one hand in the vague direction of her office. By the time she hears the door across the hall open and close, she’s already on her feet, smoothing what feels like a nonexistent wrinkle out of her dress. She can’t even meet Lane’s eyes.

“I’ll be back in a little—”

“What does he mean, you’ll—you’re going to chat about restaurants?”

Oh, shit. Joan has to refrain from putting one hand to her abdomen. Her stomach is roiling with nerves; she’s so anxious she thinks she might puke if she doesn’t get the words out correctly. It’s as if they’re stuck in her throat.

“I mean, if you’re giving him personalized recommendations, he really ought to be more considerate of your—”

“He asked me out,” Joan says in a rush. “And I said yes.”

Lane stops talking. All the air seems to rush out of the room as he stares back at her, mouth open, and his eyes blinking soundlessly behind his thick glasses.

“I was going to tell you about it once the account officially changed hands,” a lie, a lie, Jesus Christ, why is she such a liar, “but now you know. So. That’s it. We—Carl’s the new manager. He’ll meet with us again early next month.”

Lane still hasn’t said anything. Joan’s heart pounds so quickly against her chest that she feels lightheaded. Oh, god. He’s furious. He’ll scream at her, or accuse her of being unprofessional, and if he does any of that, she honestly doesn’t know how she’ll respond. Her nerves are practically raw and her stomach is still in knots and she honestly feels a little like crying.

“Right.” Lane’s voice is very clipped. Her heart sinks when she finally gets the courage to meet his gaze, and sees the taut pinch of anger in his thin mouth. “Well. That’s different, then.”

“Lane,” she rushes to say.

“No.” He’s shaking his head. “It’s—you really needn’t explain.”

She doesn’t understand why this answer upsets her so much. “But I—”

“Joan, for god’s sake. Just do whatever you like. Go out with him, if you fancy the man so much. It really doesn’t matter what I think, obviously.”

It’s like being doused in cold water. She feels stupid and small and so very, very frustrated that she can’t even think straight.

“Fine,” is all she says before she turns to leave.

As she steps into the hallway and closes Lane’s door behind her, she lets out a deep breath, and tries to put on her best face. Tony’s excited to see her, and she should be excited to see him, and she needs to stop pouting already.

_Wasn’t this what you wanted, to get everything out in the open?_

She walks into her office, through the open door, and the relieved smile she summons up when Tony beams at her is only half-faked.
Lots going on in this chapter! I actually had to split it into two pieces because it was so giant. Click on over for part 2!

My mental picture of Tony is somewhere between a young James Gandolfini and Danny Aiello. I just love the idea of Joan genuinely getting back into the dating game (and hating/dreading it, maybe for the first time) while Lane's pining on his own.

And, for those of you who aren't terrified of tarantulas, here's a video of one whose owner dresses it in costumes. You're welcome.
This time, Lane’s standing naked in the middle of a very dim, plain sitting room—not his. The only light in the room comes from a flickering street lamp silhouetted just outside the ornate window.

A few yards away, reclining on a sofa, Joan sits naked and proud with her head tipped back against the cushions and her legs spread in wanton ecstasy as Tony Blake caresses her. All Lane can do is watch with a deep slash of envy as the man buries his face into Joan’s beautiful cunt, coaxes long, lovely moans from her curved throat as he licks and sucks her toward the pinnacle of release.

He shouldn’t be here; rationally, he knows he shouldn’t be watching them, but he can’t make himself leave. And he’s so tired of pretending.

Desperate to get off while they’re too distracted to notice, he reaches down and grasps his cock in one hand.

Joan’s hands are tangled in the back of Tony’s hair, gripping and tugging at his thick wiry curls whenever he does something right. She arches back into the cushions with a sudden gasp as he groans out his appreciation. God, she’s so gorgeous like this; Lane forces himself not to close his eyes, because he wants to remember her exactly this way: messy hair tangling over the cushions and around her face, a fine sheen of sweat beading up on her upper lip and the nape of her neck and the hollow of her breasts and the cleft of her thighs—oh, Christ, he wants to lick her all over. He wants her so badly he can hardly breathe.

Lane strokes himself faster, and bites his lip to keep from moaning out loud. Perhaps he’s not quiet enough, or perhaps he moves in a way that catches her attention, because suddenly, Joan’s mouth opens in a gasp, and her brilliant blue eyes lock onto his.

His heart nearly gives out. He can’t hide from her, now. She knows what he’s doing, and there’s no way he’s going to be able to explain it away or pretend it was an accident. He saw her making love with her boyfriend and he didn’t leave; instead, he watched them—listened to them—pleasured himself to them! Like a depraved scoundrel peeping in the bushes.

Joan doesn’t scream, and she doesn’t make her lover stop his caresses. All she does is motion Lane forward, dark, lust-blown pupils holding his for several seconds before her eyes flutter closed. Tony moans and presses his forehead into the cleft of her hip for a moment, as if he’s too overwhelmed to do anything but center himself before renewing his intimate attentions.

He still has no idea Lane’s in the room.

“Don’t stop,” Joan whispers into the silence.

Her eyes flutter open—she’s looking at Lane—and so, hesitantly, Lane strokes his fingers up and down his cock, unsure at first, then faster, with renewed purpose. Joan watches him in feverish excitement, mouthing something he can’t hear from this distance. Her breath speeds up and one hand drifts up to stroke her breast and she’s still watching Lane touch himself, her eyes hooded and blown wide. Like there’s no one else in the room.

“Hurry,” she whimpers. “Hurry.”
It’s getting her hot. He’s getting her hot.

*I’ll make you come now,* Lane thinks as he watches her abdomen tighten with new urgency, as her hands clench and unclench and she begins to tremble slightly in anticipation of her climax. *Because it’s me you want. Only me.*

“That’s it, honey,” Joan’s eyes are glazed and unfocused. Lane has to grip himself by the root to keep from going off on the spot as he imagines he’s in that man’s place, his knees raw and aching and his face slick from her—so close to triumph he can taste it. “Give it to me. I want it. I wanna—”

*You’ll have it,* Lane thinks in a haze as he urges her on. And when she finally goes over the edge—when her legs lock up around Tony’s shoulders as she lets out this wild, primal shriek, yanking at his hair and bucking up against his jaw as she shudders through her peak—Lane comes so hard he nearly blacks out, still stroking himself with one messy hand as he drops down to his knees.

*Oh, oh, god, you’ll have it. As—as many times as you w-want, because you’re so—Jesus Christ, Joan, you—you’re—oh!*

Without warning, Lane comes a second time, loses all fine muscle control, and flops sideways into the carpet, utterly dead to the world.

He wakes up alone in his bed amidst a sticky mess, again, and when he attempts to roll out of the wet spot and over onto one side, he unfortunately sails right off the mattress, into the floor.

*“God damn it!”*

He smashes one palm into the carpet in impotent frustration, lies there fuming like an angry child for several seconds, and then scrambles to his feet, ignoring the sudden, throbbing ache in his shoulder and legs and lower back. To hell with the blankets, to hell with the pillowcases: he rips the sheets from the bed so carelessly there’s a distinct tearing noise from the elastic around the bottom left corner of the bed.

I don’t care, he thinks as he tosses his pajamas down on the ground and gathers everything up; he doesn’t even bother putting on his robe this time.

I don’t care because it doesn’t bloody matter, apparently. Nearly fifty years old, and waking up like a pubescent child every morning, covered in spunk, dreaming of the one woman who’s impossible to get.

“*God damn it!*” Lane snarls a second time, as he throws open the machine and flings the lump of laundry into the barrel without even bothering to untangle anything. He even throws in a scoop of detergent without looking, and ignores the subsequent shower of fine dust that swiftly settles over both machines as a result. Finally, he jabs at the button and watches hot water pour out of the spout before slamming the lid closed.

There’s breathing from the doorway behind him; of course Lewis is already here to witness all of this. Before Lane can tell the idiot to fuck off and leave him alone, his brother steps into the room and approaches the machine.

“*Here. You’ll cook the blasted things.*”

Briskly, and without another word, Lewis reaches over and clicks the temperature dial back down two settings—to cold.

Lane stares at the word in horror, and forgets, for a precious few seconds, that he’s stark naked. All he can think about is the fact that the water temperature’s been wrong all this time.
“It’s supposed to be—cold water?”

“Mm,” says Lewis casually, pursing his mouth as if they’re chatting about something as simple as the weather. “Else it sets the stain permanently.”

“Permanently,” Lane echoes. Dear god. How many sets of sheets was that?

“Quite.” Here, Lewis’s voice catches its usual hint of mischief. “You are trying to wash the spunk out, aren’t you?”

“Oh, fucking hell, Lewis!”

Lane buries his face in his palms as his cheeks blaze hot with shame.

“Did rather the same thing, the first time round—that is, if you remember. Father used to call you the Yank.”

“Jesus Christ.” Lane’s voice comes out muffled and nasal. “Why?”

“You know, overpaid, oversexed, et cetera.” Lewis stops talking for a moment, and when he speaks again, his tone turns gentle. “Think he was actually a bit proud of that development, initially, so there’s something for you.”

“Please stop talking about our bloody father,” Lane hisses, because there are some things in life which ought to be sacrosanct. Being caught naked after a humiliating series of wet dreams and ruining several sets of sheets ought to qualify as a situation where one’s parents should never be mentioned.

“Right.”

Down the hall, a toilet suddenly flushes; Lane lifts his head from his hands in order to gape at his brother, slack-jawed.

“What the hell is that?”

“Ah.” Lewis scratches one hand across his jaw, and purses his mouth. He appears to be temporarily stymied. “Well. You weren’t supposed to hear that.”

“Did someone—did you bring them here to spend the night?” Lane glances around in a panic for anything he can put on to cover himself; all he finds is a stiff, faded yellow towel hanging up by some old coats. He quickly ties this around his waist. “What in god’s name is wrong with you?”

“Oh, don’t be so prudish. You can’t pull it off, especially now.”

“Did he sleep in Nigel’s bed?”

Lewis raises one eyebrow in a clear challenge. “Do you really want to know?”

Lane’s face drains of all color, and he swiftly throws one hand into the air between them as he wrenches his face to one side.

“Never mind. Do not—for god’s sake, don’t tell me anything.”

“Right,” says Lewis slowly, and raises his voice as someone else arrives in the kitchen. Lane can’t see them – him? – from this angle, but the footsteps are confirmation enough. “Hello. Coffee in the pot, just there, if you want any.”
Lane can’t help glancing through to the kitchen to see this person, and is flabbergasted when the man finally steps into the light and appears to be no older than twenty. Fair-haired, angular, and slight, wearing slim trousers, a plain t-shirt, and a bomber jacket. My god. He looks like he’s ready to take his high school annual picture, not go out with some dodgy old man! There are probably—what are they called, the children who follow certain bands around the country? Rock groupies? Point is, there’s probably thousands out there who are older than this lad!

“Nah, I should get going.” The boy tosses his head to get his long fringe out of his eyes, and for some reason, this gesture rings a bell in Lane’s head. “Thanks.”

“Sorry, but you—you look a bit familiar,” Lane does not mean to say this, but it slips out anyway. “How—have we—met before?”

“Um,” says the lad, and grimaces slightly before glancing over at Lewis. He’s already stepping backwards toward the hall, and gives them an awkward wave. “Well, sort of. See ya.”

“Delivers your papers, technically,” Lewis says in an undertone, as the lad disappears and the front door opens and closes.

“Delivers my—are you bloody joking?”

“No,” says Lewis—and he has the nerve to grin, damn it.

Lane can hardly sputter out a reply. “What, did your hands brush when he handed you the bloody Times? Did you pass him on the way to the garbage chute and think ‘my, what a handsome foetus of a person!’ Dear god, you are so utterly, inexcusably…” he trails off when he sees Lewis pick up the half-full coffee pot “…what on earth are you doing with that?”

“Just going to pour it over your best shirts,” Lewis says sweetly. “Unless you’d like to shut your gob while you’re ahead.”

Lane does a double-take, and immediately rushes out of the kitchen and towards his bedroom before his brother can get a head start. Whether or not the man is kidding – and there’s no way to tell at this point – an attack on his clothes must always be taken seriously. It’s happened before.

“Don’t you bloody dare! I mean it, Lewis. I’ll—thrash the living daylights out of you if you do!”

“Oh, please. You couldn’t thrash a wood nymph.”

The coffee threat turns out to be a ruse, and the only adverse thing that happens is that they proceed to whip each other with the ends of rolled-up towels for the next five or ten minutes.

Either way, by the time Lane gets to work, he’s exhausted. He can’t tell if the twitch in his eye is simply stress or a migraine coming on, but the end result is that he needs some time alone to think. He spends most of the morning in his office, reclining on the sofa, with the door closed. Besides his secretary, the one person he allows to come in is Joan, and that’s only because she’s picking up some paperwork.

“Long morning?” asks Joan when she drops by, just before lunch.

She’s been careful around him ever since their little tiff, three days ago. Lane just rolls his eyes, so she knows he’s not really unhappy, just annoyed as the dickens. Plus it sometimes makes her smile when he’s a little dramatic; he has no idea why she finds this funny, but every time he succeeds in making her grin, it sends scads of butterflies rushing into his stomach.
“My paperboy apparently spent the night in my home.”

Joan purses her lips, clearly confused, but after Lane raises his eyebrows at her in a significant way, the light finally dawns.

“Oh.” She bites her lower lip to keep from laughing, but it doesn’t work, and she lets out a very uncharacteristic giggle.

Frankly, Lane finds this gesture adorable. “Yes.”

“How—how old was he?” She’s still trying not to laugh.

He makes a disgusted face. “Not old enough to sleep with a fossil.”

She hides a grin behind one hand as she plucks a couple of papers from his outbox. Before he can say anything else, and without speaking, she reaches over and squeezes his shoulder, once.

“Sorry about before,” she says quietly.

Obviously, it’s not about Lewis.

“Me too,” he mumbles.

Joan pats the seam of his jacket, and promptly withdraws her hand. “Well, I hate to run, but I’ve got to chat with Kenny about our dinner.”

“Oh. When is that?”

“Next week,” Joan says, and then glances at her watch. “Ugh. I’m already running late, and I have to drop these off. I’ll see you later.”

“Mmkay.”

As she walks out, Lane does not allow himself to dwell on how pretty she looks in her new leopard print skirt.

**

When Lane gets in, he finds Lewis sitting in the living room, counting out what appears to be an obscene amount of cash; low stacks of bills litter the coffee table, each with a small binder clip on top of it to hold the paper in place.

“Robbed a bank, have you?” Lane asks with a snort.

“Hilarious.” Lewis makes a notation on a piece of paper with a nearby pencil. “Thought it was high time we got everything settled, actually.”

“Settled?” Lane makes a face. “What do you mean?”

“Flight leaves Thursday night, so a bit of cash may come in very handy,” Lewis says with a shrug. He sets his pencil aside. “Never can tell who you’ll need to bribe for a couple of cigarettes.”
“Flight,” Lane echoes, shocked. “You’re—going home?”

“Mm.” Lewis is still counting bills. “Don’t make that face, darling. I’m sure I’ve quite overstayed my welcome by now. Not yours, obviously, but perhaps some other person’s—the little lesbian’s, or that funny little boy who writes all the ads. Who keeps track of conventions, in the end?”

“But I didn’t know you wanted to leave,” Lane sputters; his voice rises a little. “Were you—god, would you have phoned me back from London just to say you’d gone home? Were you even going to tell me before you got onto the plane?”

Lewis stops counting for a moment. He does look up, this time.

“Course I was.”

This is a rather surprising answer.

“Oh.”

His brother shrugs again. “Were you ever going to tell me about Joan?”

Lane’s heart stutters in his chest. “Well, there—there’s nothing to tell, so it’s rather a moot point.”

“But you love her,” Lewis says quietly, and makes another notation on his sheet of paper. Lane glances down, and notices that it’s a ledger. Money in, money out. Same system he uses for work.

He rubs one hand across the back of his hair, as his face blazes hot. “For god’s sake, Lewis, I really don’t feel like explaining this in detail. Just—as I am sure you must understand by now—she and I are—are very good—”

“Not asking you to explain,” Lewis interrupts mildly. “Just pointing out a fact.”

“What? No, I’m—you’re being absurd.”

“Lane,” and Lewis’s voice is so serious, strangely devoid of all sarcasm. “You dream about the woman every night. The two of you spend time together constantly, and she prefers your company, as you do hers. You know how to talk. You know how to argue. If that isn’t love, or some form of it, anyway, then what on earth are you doing?”

Lane meets his brother’s exasperated gaze. He’s about to blurt out that Lewis’s words absolutely aren’t true, he isn’t in love with her, and it doesn’t bloody matter anyway, but he can’t force the words past his lips.

It’s such a lie. It’s the biggest lie he’s told in months.

“I don’t know,” is all he says.

They’re quiet for another moment.

“Could speak to her about it,” Lewis offers.

Oh, Christ. Lane grimaces as he pictures himself stuttering through some hideous planned speech. She’d listen, naturally, and perhaps let him down with a few kind words and a kiss on the cheek, but she doesn’t—she wouldn’t—

His chest tightens with fear as he imagines admitting to her face all the things he can hardly admit to himself.
“Well, I don’t know what good talking will do,” he says finally, in a very thin voice, and pretends not to notice when Lewis actually turns to stare at him.

“My god.” His brother huffs out a breath as he grabs Lane’s wrist. “Here, give me your hand. Just buy her something pretty and get on with it.”

Lane rolls his eyes, expecting to feel a fiver or a tenner slipped into his palm; instead, Lewis gives him a stack of bills so thick he can hardly close his fist around all of them at once.

“Good lord.” Lane stares down at this ridiculous amount of money in his hand, and then looks back at his brother. There must be at least a thousand dollars here; although it’s mainly in small bills – lots of twenties. “This can’t all be mine.”

“Tis’n’t,” Lewis says with a smirk. “That’s twenty for all the lunches you bought, forty for the electrician, same for the plumbing, thirty for the painting and cleaning crew, ninety for the movers and priority freight shipping to London, plus an extra—” he counts a few ticks on his hands “—eight hundred or so from the estate sale. You remember the hideous suit of armor walked off, don’t you?”

“Yes.” But Lane does not remember Lewis earning more than two or three hundred dollars—nothing like this. “How—what else did you sell?”

“Few large pieces in storage,” Lewis says, and takes a deep breath. “Judging by the cobwebs, you won’t miss them.”

Lane glances around the room in shock. He’s not sure how he never noticed any of this before, but the walls are freshly painted—now a calming grey-blue color instead of that awful brown Becca had picked out when they moved here.

No more china and silver in the hutch. Golly—no more china hutch, either. And now that all of Becca’s leftover trinkets are gone, Lane finds that the room is rather peaceful. His bottled frigates decorate the mantle above the fireplace, along with a couple of pieces commemorating Nigel’s woeful attempts at sculpture. Hanging along the fireplace wall are his collegiate diploma, two large paintings that were down in storage, plus some pictures of Nigel as a child, and of their first day at the firm. Mrs. Campbell is handing everyone sandwiches in that ridiculous hotel suite. There are also a couple of faded photos, set into a shiny new frame.

Lane is shocked to realise that these pictures are of him and Lewis, when they were only boys. They got them done at a fair in London, he thinks, perhaps a year or two before Mother died. He pushes to his feet, and rubs one anxious hand across his mouth.

What else has he done? What else haven’t I noticed?

Nigel’s room is the first stop on Lane’s mind; he pads down the hallway and toward the doorway, mentally preparing himself to see it completely refinished, shorn of its aeroplane bedspread and the Mickey Mouse stickers which littered the wall behind the bed, and all the little things that had made Nigel’s childhood so dear.

He opens the door. The room is relatively unchanged.

There’s a new paint color, yes—handsome crimson—and some new striped linens, plus a pair of sturdy floating bookshelves installed on both sides of the room. One shelf is fairly empty, while the other is full of Nigel’s childhood books and comics, plus a ragged cuddly toy. On a table at the bottom of the bed sits an open suitcase record player. Was that here before, or is it new?

There’s also a telephone on the bedside table, between the two beds?
But the aeroplane comforter is still spread on the second bed. And although the Mickey Mouse stickers have clearly been peeled up from behind Nigel’s headboard, four of them have a place of honor along the border of a crisp corkboard that hangs just to the left of a handsome new desk. The desk sits flush along the same wall as the door, and on the surface of this desk sits Lane’s wedding portrait—the frame’s been glued back together—along with a few smaller pictures of Becca and the family.

Lane turns around to find that Lewis isn’t behind him, and practically runs back to the living room, where his brother has gone back to his ledger with a very determined air, and seems to be separating out three distinct stacks of money.

“Guest toilet’s fixed, as well,” Lewis says lightly to the air as he thumbs through the smallest stack of cash, and pockets this one, “as is that blasted leak above your shower. And if you don’t like the rest, hire someone to do it over. Whatever you think’s best.”

The entire effort must have taken weeks. Why would Lewis go to all this trouble? Why spend so much time on silly little things like new paint and selling furniture when he could have been seeing—well, the Statue of Liberty, or something? Or going to dinner? Or staying at home?

“You did all of this for—for me?”

Lewis puts down the money onto the table, and pats the stack with the top of his hand, twice, as if willing it to stay put.

“Well. You’ll enjoy it, won’t you?”

He finally glances up from the table.

Lane swallows hard. A surge of gratitude bubbles up inside his chest, and before he can think—before he can stop himself—he’s crossed the room, flung himself down onto the sofa, and embraced his brother in a tight hug. He buries his face in the lapel of Lewis’s jacket, right near the neck. For the first time in a long time—perhaps the first time, full stop—he’s desperate to convince him to stay. Live here. Make a life in New York. Get to know the city and the good restaurants and everyone who’s important. Just stay.

Tears prick his eyes, and he’s sure Lewis is going to tease him for getting maudlin, but this time, his brother doesn’t say a word. At first, Lewis just taps him on the back a few times with a flat-palmed hand, but when Lane still doesn’t let go, Lewis puts his arms around him, and lets out a deep sigh. One hand curls against the shoulders of Lane’s jacket while the other rests absently on the nape of his neck, and after another minute, Lewis begins to hum a nameless tune. The deep baritone notes rumble pleasantly through Lane’s ear and chest, and remind him of the flash of memory he had a few days ago—of falling asleep in a trundle bed with a hot water bottle warming the blankets. Huddling into Lewis’s chest in the night when there was crying downstairs. Lewis used to draw the blankets up over Lane’s head and put one hand over his ear, so he could sleep.

“It’s all right, little one. We’ll be all right.”

“Thank you,” Lane finally chokes out, and lifts his head.

When he meets Lewis’s gaze, he can see his brother’s eyes are damp, too, but the man’s expression doesn’t stay serious for very long.

“Right,” Lewis clears his throat, and chucks Lane under the chin with the knuckles of his first two fingers. “Now, then. If you’re getting Joan a gift, beware the brooches.”
“Oh, get off,” Lane shoves his brother’s hand away. It causes him to fall sideways into the sofa pillow. “You insane person.”

Steam is rising from a fresh cup of tea that Dawn’s just delivered, and as Joan drags the paper teabag around the mug by the string, willing the chamomile to steep a little faster, a knock sounds at her door.

“Come in.” She lets go of the string, and sits up a little.

When Lewis Pryce pokes his head around the door, and saunters inside, it makes her arch a suspicious eyebrow.

“Not busy, are you?” he asks. “Wanted a quick word.”

Joan shakes her head no, and gestures for him to close the door.

He takes a seat in the blue chair directly across from her, and crosses one leg at the knee as he leans backwards: a picture of casual elegance in subtle black-checked houndstooth.

“Well, my dear, you’re nearly rid of me at last,” he says, studying his nails as he speaks. “So if you’re planning a little party to mark the occasion, Friday would be the day to do it.”

“I’ll put that on the books,” Joan says dryly, and picks up a still burning cigarette from her ashtray, rolling it between her finger and thumb idly for a second before picking up her pen with the other hand, and writing a quick notation above Thursday’s tasks. Lewis goes home. “What can I do for you?”

He’s quiet for a moment—which is bad enough—but when Joan looks up, he seems to be deliberating how to start this conversation, which is downright terrifying.

“I wanted to thank you,” he says, and scratches at his beard. “Properly.”

Joan shakes her head no, automatic. “Oh, I don’t think—”

This doesn’t shut him up. “When Lane needed someone, you were—”

“Please, don’t. This really isn’t necessary.”

“All right, all right. Skipping ahead.”

With a flourish, he produces a small, newspaper-wrapped box from his inside jacket pocket—about two inches tall, tied with a bit of thin yellow ribbon—and slides it across her desk until it sits just on top of her calendar.

She stares at the present, stunned, before her narrowed eyes flick toward his. “What did you do?”

He lifts one shoulder in a shrug; although he’s clearly trying to affect casualness, the fondness in his
voice gives him away.

“Got to open it to find out.”

Although Joan prides herself on being unflappable, the mischief in his eyes is impossible to ignore, and so she reaches for the box, unties the ribbon with a steady hand, and slices through the small pieces of Scotch tape with her letter opener. When she unfolds the paper, she discovers a shallow, square, royal purple box, and when she lifts the lid, a gilded brooch stares up at her from a bed of thick velvet.

From this angle, the bottom layer of the brooch reminds her of a Renaissance painting; it looks like a sunburst or a stylized halo set into thick, wavy rays. The second layer is more intricate. Large fleur de lis sprout proudly from four sides of the elegant shield crest in the middle of the brooch, and at the widest part of the shield, the last fleur de lis is threaded through a low crown which lines the top border. In the middle of the shield banner, just above the lowermost point, before it slopes up into two gentle curves, a roaring lion stands on its back legs.

“Proper champion deserves a coat of arms,” is all Lewis tells her.

Oh, my god. The longer Joan stares at the open box, the more she thinks she might cry; she has to bite her lip to stay composed. For the first time, she truly understands why Lane’s so fiercely loyal to his brother. As irritating as the man may be, underneath all of the snark and the bluster, he has a good heart. She didn’t expect that. She didn’t expect any of this.

Joan lets out a ragged sigh. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Then say nothing.” He gives her a quick, furtive smile. Obviously, this kind of sincerity is uncomfortable for him. “Just know that you have my deepest admiration. Not just for Lane, but—“ he waves a hand toward the conference room “—generally speaking. You’re really quite formidable.”

“Now you have to stop,” Joan waves one hand back and forth to indicate she’s getting choked up. “Sorry. This is—very lovely.”

“Golly.” He pulls an alarmed face, and just like that, the moment is gone. “Well, we can’t have everyone see you cry. Little brother might slug me in the nose.”

Without another word, he sits back down in the blue chair, and once Joan’s got herself under control, they go back to chatting about the weather and Lewis’s favorite parts of the city.

“Was there anything you didn’t get to do, while you were here?”

He considers this question, pursing his mouth as he deliberates. “Oh. Nothing much. Thought about crank-calling Charles if Lane’s mood got too gloomy, but you can’t have everything when you’re on holiday.”

“Charles,” she says carefully. Your youngest brother?”

“Ah. I see the man’s nasty little reputation precedes him.”

Truthfully, Joan’s heard very little about the youngest Pryce—other than the fact that he’s cruel, used to taunt Lane constantly, and has an ego the size of Mars.

“So what were you going to say?”
“Not sure,” Lewis plucks a pencil from the holder on her desk. “Thought about making up tax liens, but that’s a bit risky. Unpaid nightclub bill sounded better, anyway. Stuffed-up banker with a double life.”

“Mandated employee psychiatric testing,” Joan offers with a wink.

He raises an eyebrow. “You’ve done this before.”

“Kenny and Paul and I used to put things in people’s offices as a joke.” A snort of laughter escapes her as she thinks about it. “Animals or weird props. There was one idea I had that—”

She bites her lip again to stop herself from admitting how stupid it was.

Lewis looks intrigued. “What kind of idea?”

“Well,” her smile goes a little soft. “On my last day at the old place, I was going to place an upside-down coffee mug in the center of Harry’s desk, with a little note on top from a blushing young secretary. You know. Something he couldn’t resist picking up.”

A delighted smirk spreads across Lewis’s face. “And what, pray, would be trapped beneath the lip of that very innocent-looking mug?”

Her smile widens. “Did you know he’s terrified of spiders?”

They stare at each other for a moment.

“Do you know,” Lewis says lightly, “I passed a little pet store earlier in the week; one that sold exotic things. Lizards. Snakes. Tropical arachnids. I’m sure I could manage to stop in again before I go.”

“Well, I’ll make you a deal,” Joan echoes his tone as she gathers up a pad of post-it notes and a pencil, and then places these at the edge of her desk. “Write down Charles’s number, and I’ll take that prank call off your hands.”

Lewis’s grin turns sharklike. “Just record it for me, dear. That’s all I ask.”

**

Friday morning: Ken’s trailing Harry into his office as they bitch about the latest Yankees game. He’s half-awake without his coffee, and barely paying attention, so it’s not until Harry stops in front of his desk, and squints at an upside-down mug with a note taped to it, that Ken realizes something is weird.

“Holy shit.” Harry cuts him a stunned glare after he reads the thing. “I think Scarlett’s a little horny for the Crane.”

“That’s disgusting,” Ken says, deadpan.

“Wonder what’s in here.”

“Uh, I’m guessing she just washed it.”
“No. Can’t be. You think she left her underwear—” Harry picks up the mug, and shrieks out loud. “Ah, shit!”

Ken gets a glimpse of two giant hairy legs crawling forward, and jumps backward by reflex. Harry’s already panicking; he pitches the mug into the floor, and stumbles back from the desk so quickly he falls back into his ornate Civil War painting, knocking it off the wall and sending the gold cannons flying.

“Augh! Spider! Get it—off!”

He sprints for the doorway, stumbles as he rounds the frame, and falls into the hallway, still scrabbling away on his hands and knees as fast as possible.

Further down the hallway, someone out there is cracking up.

Even as he’s trying to stumble out of the room, Ken’s already wheezing with nervous laughter as he meets the stunned, wide-eyed gazes of the crew in the hallway. Somewhere in another office, he can hear a secretary giggling behind a closed door. Probably the culprit.

“Oh, man,” he huffs out. That was priceless. “Oh, man.”

Chapter End Notes

Lewis finally goes home, and my inner child is sad. :(( It’s funny; he wanted to stick around almost through the end of the story, but even in the various iterations, it just didn’t *quite* work out that way. Although the mischief factor is a little more palatable now that you know what he’s been doing for the past few weeks. (Besides taking odd jobs, haha.)

The song he’s humming to Lane is an old WW1 classic, "Dear Little Boy of Mine".

Next chapter: Myra comes back, Joan faces some hard truths, and Lane takes stock of his future....
After the stress of the past few weeks, Joan has to admit that it’s a relief to see Myra again. Although she’s never needed to talk to a psychiatrist, it’s still reassuring to see a familiar face, especially now that Lane’s been doing so well. There aren’t many people who understand his overall progress, or who can answer Joan’s most delicate questions, generally speaking. Myra’s been a good sport at guiding her toward the best ways to help him without seeming intrusive.

“I’m sure you see plenty of patients who haven’t recovered as fully as Lane has, but in my opinion, he’s done exceptionally well.”

Joan doesn’t know how long she’s been talking, but she can’t seem to shut up. She really does need to find something else to get excited about, other than her friends, her mother, and Kevin.

“Even the migraines don’t disrupt him that often. As long as he sticks to a good sleep schedule, and doesn’t strain himself, he seems to do fine.”

Myra’s smile is strangely sly. “He’s surpassed most of the others I’ve seen.”

Now that Joan’s on the subject, it’s honestly a little difficult to stop. She allows herself to brag for another few seconds. “I’m just so proud of him. Nobody else knows how much work it took for him to get to this point. Everyone thinks he’s on some low-salt diet for his heart.”

“Has he told many others what happened?”

“Oh. Well, his brother. Lewis was very concerned.” Joan lowers her gaze to her tea mug. “Honestly, more like distraught. I don’t know if you saw the updates to the apartment?”

“I did. It looks beautiful.”

“Yes.” Joan lets out a breath. “He worked hard. It almost made up for the fact that he drove Lane completely bananas.”

“Sure. But I meant, has Lane told anyone other than family?”

Joan comes up blank for the first time in a long time; her mouth opens and closes in surprise. She has no idea.

Months ago, she could rattle off all the answers to Myra’s questions without blinking. But more and more often, these days, she’s at a loss.

And yes, of course she wants Lane to continue doing well. Of course she wants him to live a full life. It’s just hard to accept that he doesn’t want to share all of these little milestones with her. Or rather, with a friend.

“I don’t know.”

“That’s okay.” Myra just shrugs. “These things take time.”

“Why do you ask? Is that bad?” Joan’s frown deepens. “Should he tell people?”
“Well,” Myra gives her a knowing glance, “that’s up to him. Like you said, he’s been very fortunate with his recovery so far. And you never know. Some people even get into mental health advocacy once they become stable.”

Joan gives her a grateful look. Maybe it’s not so terrible after all.

“Either way, I think he’s becoming more sure of himself—confident. With an attitude like that, you never know what could happen.” Myra smiles warmly at Joan before taking a sip of her coffee. “He could take up a new hobby. Heck, he could even start dating again, once the dust settles.”

The idea startles Joan so much she almost knocks her silverware into the floor. For a split second, she’s speechless.

“Dating.”

Myra actually laughs at Joan’s shocked expression. “Well, honey, do you think he’s going to stay divorced forever?”

“No, but he doesn’t need to jump into some random fling, either. I—maybe he’ll want to start going out eventually, but there isn’t anyone good on the horizon. And right now, I just don’t see the rush.”

Myra gives Joan a very queer look. One eyebrow cocks into a sharp little bow.

Quickly, Joan takes another sip of her tea. “What?”

“Well, how long do you think the man should wait? If it were up to you?”

“Oh, Myra.”

“Humor me. Is he waiting for just anyone, or for a specific person?”

The other shoe drops.

“What?” Joan realizes she’s still fiddling with the string of her teabag, pulling the tab one way and another so that color swirls through the water. She quickly drops it. “No. You—Lane’s my friend. Why would I care who he’s seeing?”

“I don’t know,” Myra says with a careful little shrug. Sincerity radiates off of her in waves. “You’re the only person who can answer that.”

“Don’t turn this into—” Suddenly, Joan is so enraged she can hardly speak. “For god’s sake, it doesn’t matter. I was just making a comment.”

“Sounds like it matters a lot.”

Myra reaches across the table, but Joan yanks her arm up and backwards before the other woman’s fingers can brush her wrist.

“Why are you giving me the third degree?”

“Why don’t you want to say that Lane’s important to you?”

“Because you’re twisting my words!” At the counter, someone’s head perks up, and so Joan quickly lowers her voice to a whisper. “All I said was that he can do whatever he wants. It’s not my life. I’m not involved.”
“Do you want to be?”

Joan sees red. “Maybe your husband should watch out, if you care so much about who Lane is or isn’t screwing.”

Myra’s cheeks darken, and she narrows her eyes, but she still doesn’t take the bait, just cocks her head in an imperious way and speaks very, very slowly.

“Joan Harris, I didn’t say one word about anybody screwing.”

_Oh, shit._

Joan can’t find the words to explain any more. It was a verbal slip—no, less than that. A slip is deliberate. This doesn’t mean anything. She’s exhausted and she’s nervous and she’s just blowing everything out of proportion. All she’s trying to say is that Lane shouldn’t rush into bed with some stupid floozy just because he can.

For all she knows, maybe he already has a girlfriend waiting in the wings: some cute young thing he met through one of Lewis’s adventures, or even while sitting in the waiting room at the doctor’s office. Maybe on the mornings when he shows up to work pink-cheeked and slightly sweaty and a little out of breath, he’s been in bed having wild athletic sex with that girl, instead of walking the twenty or thirty minutes over from Sutton Place for a little exercise.

Jesus, why is she even thinking about that? What does it matter?

“You’re delusional,” she hisses feebly, grabbing for her purse with one blind hand and flinging a couple of crumpled bills onto the table. Her eyes sting in a dangerous way, but she just turns up the venom in response as she slides out of the booth, voice high and rushed. “And I am not going to sit here and have some—washed-up idiot too stupid to see the obvious—”

_“Really?”_ draws Myra, with a flash of teeth that isn’t a smile. “You want to project on me right now?”

Joan’s head is pounding and her stomach’s churning and she feels stupid, stupid, stupid. She has to get out of here before she starts crying, and so she shoves out of the booth with panic welling in her throat.

“You’re wrong.”

Before she can look back, she storms off and out the front door, sucking down big gasps of cold winter air in an attempt to clear her head.

God, of course she didn’t mean it _like that_. Having any sort of feelings for Lane would be ridiculous—impossible, even. All she’s doing is considering the bigger picture. He shouldn’t date some random woman when he’s made such incredible progress; he doesn’t need to risk having a snotty twenty-year-old stomp on his self-esteem. Why would he do that?

Who would understand the scale of the journey he’s gone through in the past year—or more? What kind of woman would be able to see past all the little oddities on the surface? Who wouldn’t just write him off as some hysterical little story to tell at parties? Remember when I went out with that weird financier?

What if they laughed at him?

_What if it wasn’t someone random at all?_
Joan shakes her head no, so vehemently that she accidentally catches the eye of a confused stranger lingering in a nearby doorway.

No. Myra’s wrong. Joan is with Tony now. He’s a good man, and they’ll have a good time together tonight.

That’s the end of it.

**

The silence in their stylish hotel room is agonizing. At the moment, Joan’s so embarrassed that she can’t even speak.

Half-dressed with her slip bunched up around her waist and her bra askew, she grips the top sheet in one hand in an attempt to center herself.

Standing next to the bed with his back to her, Tony hasn’t said a word in several minutes; a dim stream of light flickers through the windows as he pulls on his undershirt.

Joan can’t stop watching him. She can’t even think straight.

*Fix this. Talk to him. Say something, damn it!*

“Tony, I—I’m so sorry.”

He doesn’t turn around. “Yeah. I got that.”

“I know, but I—” Joan flushes scarlet all the way down to her toes; shame curls deep in her stomach. How the hell could she have done something this ridiculous? “My mind was on work. That’s all.”

He’s already threading his arms through the sleeves of his collared shirt; the shadow of his fingers plays across the wall as he buttons it up.

“Really not making me feel better.”

She gulps down a breath in an attempt to keep from panicking, and presses a palm to her forehead as she sits up. The sheet pools around her crossed legs.

“You have to believe me. I’ve never done this. I *don’t* do this.”

“All right.” He still won’t look at her. “Whatever you say.”

Shit. Why isn’t anything working?

“Please don’t be angry,” she pleads.

Tony’s hands still at the top of his collar, and after a second, he finally turns to look at her. Although he’s in profile, she can still make out the fraught expression on his face.

“Do you love him?”

She recoils; the sheet flutters to the mattress.
“What?”

“Simple question.” He lets out a breath. “I mean, do you two have some kind of history I don’t know about?”

“Do we—oh, my god.” She stutters out a laugh because it’s so absurd, but quickly stamps it down when Tony’s face darkens, and he turns away. “No. Of course we—I don’t think about him that way. Ever.”

“Come on.”

“I don’t,” she says weakly.

When he speaks again, Tony doesn’t even sound angry, just disappointed.

“You said his name, for god’s sake.”

Joan flinches. Just hearing this out loud makes her want to burst into tears and beg for forgiveness.

“IT was an accident.”

Closing her eyes doesn’t stop her from remembering it all over again: Tony’s warm weight settled on top of her nearly-naked body while his cock brushed gently between her legs. Rough day-old stubble grazed her jaw and neck as he sucked a bruise into the skin just below her ear; the sandpaper rasp of his face pressed against her throat made her shiver with delight.

But when her eyes slid closed, suddenly she wasn’t seeing Tony at all, just a flash of blondish red hair, and a shocking spray of freckles dotted across a familiar crooked nose. When he’d finally met her gaze, the mischievous glint in his blue eyes had made her gasp out loud and clutch him even tighter.

Just like that. Oh, yes. Oh—

“Why’d you even invite me up in the first place?”

“Stop.” Joan reaches out and puts a hand against the small of his back; he startles at the contact. “I’m here with you. I like you.”

“Well, it kinda seems like you don’t want me.”

Joan’s heart drops into her stomach.

“Tony.”

She knows exactly what she’s supposed to say.

Of course I do. We were having such a good time. It was a mistake. It meant nothing. Let me make it up to you.

“Please come back to bed,” she murmurs, and strokes his back a little—not trying to get him going, just trying to soothe his hurt feelings.

No reaction. It still doesn’t work.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” he finally says, and walks toward the bureau to pick up his suit pants.
With nothing to hold it in place, her palm drops away from the small of his back and falls to the mattress.

**

He doesn’t call.

Joan waits until after lunch to indulge the heavy, maudlin feeling that’s unfurled inside her chest; it’s easy to pour a dram of gin into the earl grey she’s nursing. Without milk, the hot drink feels soothing in a medicinal way, and it doesn’t keep her from finishing the rest of her quarter end paperwork two days ahead of schedule.

The second and third cups of spiked tea boost her spirits even higher, and by the time she leaves for her hair appointment so she can change into something a little more impressive before her client dinner, Joan doesn’t think twice before pouring the rest of the gin into a large silver flask she’s kept stashed in the bottom drawer of her desk.

Engraved. Roger gave this to her for her wedding. She’d thought it was a dumb choice at first, but now, she thinks the gift had less to do with his careless whims than she’d imagined. Maybe he knew she’d need it.

By four thirty, Joan’s at the salon, feeling slightly more normal. She’s even able to relax and listen to the idle chitchat going on around her while Marjorie sets and pins up locks of soaking wet hair into hard plastic rollers with warm brown velvet and metal cores.

Five o’clock comes, and she’s sipping leisurely from her flask, sitting under the warm heat of the whirring, industrial-sized dryer, and leafing through a wrinkled issue of Cosmopolitan as she and Marjorie and a few others gossip about nothing at all. By six thirty, her hair and makeup are finished, and she’s picked up the gown and coat that were waiting at the dry cleaners.

Joan gets back to the Time Life building with almost ten minutes to spare. Everyone is gone for the night – even creative – so it’s easy for her to slip into the ladies’ room and change without a care in the world, without even bothering to lock the door.

She hums to herself as she steps into her dress, zips it up, and smooths out the verdant green chiffon against her skin. It’s so pretty. One-shouldered with a sheer panel to hide her other bra strap. A layer of filmy chiffon cascades down from the bodice and floats around her toes like the silkiest caftan. A silver filigree brooch adorns her right shoulder and anchors the chiffon in place. It’s prettier than Joan would normally wear to a client meeting, but it’s not like she could have gone to a late dinner in something as plain as a skirt suit. Not at this time of night. Better to stand out, especially if she’s the only professional woman at the table.

He’s never going to call you back, whispers a tiny voice in the back of Joan’s mind as she adjusts the single strap of her dress against her clavicle.

She takes another gulp from her flask, ignoring the same voice that whispers stupid, stupid as she secures it under one of her garters.

**
Dinner goes fine for the first hour. Joan’s on and upbeat and ready to tease any kind of life out of Ed, despite the fact that his wife’s at home sick. Is the woman terminally ill or just out with a nasty flu? These are the kinds of questions you can’t ask in the middle of the entrée, and Cynthia’s context clues are zero help.

The other shoe drops when she’s almost halfway through her salmon. She’s not a lightweight or a sick drunk, thank god, but Joan can feel the pull of total plastation when it hits.

Wait. Plastation’s the wrong word. What’s the one she meant?

Within seconds, the room gets a little brighter, slightly loose around the edges, and her stomach gets that familiar soaring feeling. Like she’s on the biggest coaster at Coney Island.

And yet somehow nobody else has noticed how drunk she is. Can they tell she’s totally blasted? Is she being too obvious?

Her eyes are awkwardly wide as she listens to everyone and laughs and smiles through some small talk about Cynthia’s cousin’s kids.

From this angle, sitting directly across the table, Ed really doesn’t look like he’s in the peak of health, just radiates an orange and white glow in his beige dinner jacket, like a creamsicle with a bad rug. Or a shaved-and-dyed poodle.

*Oh, boy. Oh, don’t say that out loud.*

“Well,” and suddenly Cynthia’s hand is on Joan’s arm, “if you’ll excuse us, we’ve got to go powder our noses. Joan?”

Ken and his father in law stand as Joan and Cynthia make their way out of the dining room and into the marble-tiled restroom. Joan’s focusing all her energy on not staggering; it’s easy to stand by the sinks and say hello to the attendant as Cynthia relieves herself.

When Joan realizes she wants to go sit on the sofa, starts to walk over, and falls down like a sack of potatoes, with her arms splayed out in front of her, she finally realizes she may be too drunk to play this off.

“Oh!”

Her purse and flask skid loudly across the floor and past the attendant’s station.

“What was that?” Cynthia calls. A toilet flushes loudly, drowning out the rest of her sentence.

Joan can’t even answer. The attendant gathers them up, hurries over and helps her into a sitting position.

“Ma’am? You all right?”

“Yes, of course.” Joan accepts the fresh tissue the woman pushes into her hand. “I just—tripped on my hem, that’s all.”

The stall door unlocks, Cynthia walks out, and finds Joan sitting to the right of the paper towel dispenser, almost under the small counter that doubles as equal parts attendant station and lipstick mirror.
“Oh, my god. Are you okay?”

“Yes,” Joan manages after a second of silence, and dabs her forehead with the now-crumpled tissue before letting out a deep breath. “It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“Thank you for your help.” Cynthia tells the attendant, who nods and walks away. “I’ll take it from here.”

“I’m sorry,” Joan says again.

Her flask and purse sit safely in her lap, but the glint of silver clearly draws Cynthia’s eye.

Gingerly, she reaches out and shakes Joan’s flask from side to side, eyebrows lifting in surprise when she hears a little bit of gin sloshing around in the bottom.

“Some party you’re having. Are we invited?”

“I was just trying to cheer up at lunch,” Joan sighs, and takes two more tissues from the box. “Bad date last night.”

“You’ve been drinking since lunch?” Cynthia lowers her voice, and immediately holds out one hand. “Here. Give me those. I’ll touch up your lipstick, and then we’re going to go out there and call you a cab home.”

“No, we’re not.” Joan pulls a face. “I promise, I’m fine.”

“You’re really not. We’ll tell Daddy that you aren’t feeling well. Kenny’ll be—”

“No. Come on, Cynthia!” Joan shakes her head no, and is thankful she’s the good kind of drunk, not nauseated, because the gesture just makes her feel like she’s leaning out of a car window with the breeze rolling through her hair. She wants to wave her arms up and down against the swirling currents. “I can’t go home yet. I wanna stay.”

“Well, you can’t pitch like this.”

“Not going to.” Joan focuses her energy into sitting up straight. “Um. All we hafta do ‘s keep your dad talking to Ken. ‘S easy. Let him joke and talk and—everything.” She hiccups a little. “And I’ll—put on my—listening face. It’ll be great.”

“Oh, my god. Okay. Let’s go.” A deep furrow is etched between Cynthia’s brows, but she gamely helps Joan up from the sofa and ushers her out into the lobby. “We’ve already been in here too long.”

They hurry out into the lobby with their arms linked in a sisterly way. Joan’s already fumbling for her clutch purse; but drops it onto the tile before she can get it in hand. Cynthia quickly stoops to pick it up.

While she’s distracted, Joan glances right and sees an empty telephone booth a few feet away. She quickly swirls toward the door and thumps down onto the bench in an ungainly way.

“Wait! I have to—make a call.”

“What? No, you can’t just—” Cynthia huffs out a sigh and puts Joan’s purse on the bench next to her. “Never mind. I’ll tell them there’s a problem with your babysitter. Sit right there. I’ll be right back.”
Squaring her shoulders, she hurries away, toward the dining room.

Joan ignores the stares of the crowd waiting for tables as she shuts the door of the little telephone booth, thumbs open her purse, and shoves a couple of dimes into the slot with clumsy fingers.

One ring. Another. Another. Another.

What is she doing? Why can’t she just leave well enough—?

“Mmph.” Lane clears his throat. “Sorry. Hello?”

Joan’s entire body floods with goosebumps.

“Hi. It’s me.”

“Joan?” He sounds confused. “Are you at home?”

“No,” she snorts. “But you aren’t either.”

“Oh. Well, no. Erm. Just putting in some extra hours. Meant to take a little break before I went back to it. Order in a Chinese, that sort of thing. But I’m still here, and the food isn’t. And then I put the papers down somewhere, and now they’re gone.” He huffs out a breath. “Probably never find them.”

She’s already giggling.

“And now you’re laughing at me. Wonderful.”

“No.” Joan traces one fingertip over the concave outline of the rotary dial, and bites her lip to dim her smile. “Check the end table by the sofa. The side hidden by the potted plant. You always leave things over there and forget them.”

“Yes, ha ha ha. One mustn’t doubt the psychic connection of a woman calling in from—“ he makes a surprised noise, “oh, hang on a minute.”

She laughs even harder as he puts the phone down with a clank.

When he comes back, he sounds extremely chipper. “Remind me never to mock your terrifying omnicience.”

Joan laughs again, low and pleased.

“Anyway, thanks. Must say, I—”

“Hey. Don’t go home yet,” Joan blurts out, and sits on her free hand to keep from running it through her coiffed hair. The idea comes to her instantly; of course she should stop by the office after dinner. Of course she should see him.

He pauses before answering. “Sorry?”

“After dinner. I’m coming back to the office. So don’t—” she hiccup again, and has to put one hand over her mouth “—you should wait for me, okay?”

“Oh.” He lets out a soft breath; static crackles down through the receiver. “Well, what—are you with clients?”

“Yeah, but I’m prob’ly going home soon,” Joan glances toward the dining room. “M too drunk to
stay much longer, and Kenny’s bored out of his mind.”

Lane bursts out laughing. She can’t help laughing with him, until she sees Kenny and Cynthia striding out from the dining room with identical concerned looks on their faces, scanning the room to see where she’s gone.

“Shit, they’re coming over. But don’t leave, okay? I wanna see you.”

“All right.”


“I will. I promise. Just—phone when you’re on the way.”

Joan hangs up, just in time to open the folding booth door and come face to face with both Cosgroves.

Standing next to his wife, with his arms folded across his chest, Ken’s clearly anxious and jittery. The penguin suit certainly doesn’t do him any favors in that department. He looks like a skittish Titanic passenger.

“Okay, look, Dad thinks your kid has a fever or something, so we’ve got to keep this short. Why the hell did you pick tonight to pull a Roger Sterling?”

“Hey. Roger doesn’t get drunk at client dinners.”

After she blurts this gem out, Joan puts a hand over her mouth.

Nobody’s supposed to know that. Part of the sell. State secret. Big secret.

“That’s not funny,” Ken growls.

Cynthia puts a comforting hand on his arm.

Oh, thank god, they think she’s joking.

“Really, I’m fine,” Joan makes a conscious effort to sit up straight, and regards Ken with the clearest stare she can muster. “I just need some—some water.”

“You can’t talk details like this. Six sheets to the wind.”

“Oh, the hell I can’t!”

A savage gleam comes to Ken’s eye. “Tell me the name of Kinsey’s play without laughing.”

“Ken, come on,” Joan’s mouth purses as she tries not to snicker, and she flashes him a pleading look. “That isn’t fair.”

“That isn’t fair.”

“See? Sauced. I once saw you needle him about it, straight-faced, for twenty minutes.”

“Fine.” Joan feels like pouting, and just manages not to cross her arms over her chest. “Just—give me the contract, then. When we get back. I’ll pretend to read.”

“You’re not talking media buys,” Ken warns. “Just act like you’re proofing.”

“All right, all right,” Joan hisses. “I won’t.”
She keeps this promise for all of five minutes once they’re back at the table. Ken’s yammering about some football game and cracking Ed up with his imitation of one of the less talented New York players, while Cynthia’s just being little-girl charming, as if being on her best behavior for Daddy is going to somehow mask the fact that Joan’s so drunk she can barely keep her cigarette lit.

A little drop of ash suddenly falls onto the paper.

Joan puts the cigarette in the nearest ashtray, and brushes the rest of the ash away from the subtotal column.

She has to do a double take when she reads the number under the greyish residue. ‘S way too high.

“Ed.”

All eyes snap to hers. Across the table, Kenny looks terrified, but Ed just seems bemused.

“Why the hell would you spend thirty thousand on direct mail pieces?”

“Thirty thousand,” Ed repeats flatly.

Joan frowns down at the page in front of her; although half the type is swimming, she feels like she can read the number by her thumb reasonably well, and quickly folds down the top left corner.

“That’s what it says.”

Cynthia leans in and glances over Joan’s left shoulder to confirm this; Joan gets the faintest whiff of White Shoulders before the other woman makes a surprised noise.

“Daddy, she’s right. That’s way too much.”

“Let me see that.” Ed’s shoving his glasses onto his nose, and motioning for Joan to hand him the rest of the finalized budget; quickly, she hefts the pile of papers in his direction. He takes it, flips to the page Joan had flagged earlier, and sits there with a stunned look on his face as he examines it.

Joan’s sure she’s been found out; the anxiousness in her stomach keeps building and the room feels like it’s sliding. But when Ed pulls off his glasses and looks up at her, he’s grinning. Honest to god, smiling ear-to-ear, like she’s just given him the best news of his life. Or maybe given him a blowjob.

Don’t think about blowjobs in front of his daughter.

“You just saved me twenty seven grand.”

Joan’s mouth drops into an oh of surprise.

Next to Ed, Ken looks wrung out with relief, and Cynthia’s beaming.

Thankfully Ed isn’t waiting for Joan to say anything poetic.

“Listen,” he says as he reaches into his inner jacket pocket, and pulls out a slim white envelope.

“Your kid like baseball?”
“Oh, my gosh,” Cynthia murmurs.

“Yes.” For a second, Joan forgets that Kevin doesn’t pay much attention to anything except throwing GI Joes into the toilet. “Um. The Mets are his favorite.”

“And now I know two more Mets fans,” Ken jokes.

“Well, we’re sponsoring a little charity event in a couple of weeks. Nothing fancy, just a few drinks with the Foundation. I’m sure your boy would love to meet some of the players in person, even if they’re not on the field.”

He slides the envelope across the table. Joan stares at it with her mouth open.

“Are you kidding?”

“Hey, don’t thank me too much. I’m only going for Yogi.”

“Daddy’s really a Yankees man.”

“Ed.” Joan’s smile is so wide it practically splits her face. “My goodness. I don’t know what to say.”

“Honey, just say you’ll see us there.” He pats her hand, and seems tickled at his own generosity. “Now. Enough business. Where’d that waiter of ours get to?”

**

Joan stumbles into the Time-Life lobby and waves a distracted hand at Victor, the night security guard, who’s sitting behind his desk with a battered mystery novel. He waves back without a word.

To her right, Cynthia tails her so closely she might as well be Joan’s partner in a three-legged race, while Ken hovers just awkwardly behind them.

“You sure you left your keys upstairs?”

“Yes,” Joan insists as the bell dings and they board the elevator.

“Because we could give you some cab fare home. You don’t look so steady.”

“Don’t be such a baby,” Joan hisses as she slaps at the button for floor thirty-seven, and slouches into the paneling. ‘S really comfortable. “I can walk.”

Probably. She’s pretty sure.

The ride up isn’t as long as she’s expecting; once the doors open, she strides out before anyone has a chance to say boo.

“I’ll wait out here,” Ken offers.

Joan barely pays attention to him. Walking forward at a fast clip, she braces her hands in front of her to push open the glass doors. Still unlocked. She can almost hear Cynthia wince when her palms smack against the glass, but the door pushes open easily.
“Is somebody else in there?” Cynthia asks loudly.

“Don’t know,” Ken answers, distant.

“Hellooo?” Joan calls out. The mahogany doors are closed. Why’re they closed? He said he’d be here. “Where’d you go?”

“Joan, honey, why don’t you tell me where your wallet is, and I’ll just—”

One of the double doors swings open, and there, framed in the dim light, is Lane. His eyebrows jump up when he sees her.

“What on earth are you shouting about?”

“Well, I didn’t know it was open,” Joan huffs, before she remembers Cynthia is right beside her. “We just finished dinner. Um. You remember—Ken’s wife.”

“Hi,” Cynthia sounds confused. “So sorry. I hope we’re not interrupting your work. Joan forgot her keys in her office, and she’s a—a little drunk.”

"Oh. I was just working late, so it isn't—"

"Come on. I'm not that drunk," Joan huffs loudly to the room.

Is that a smirk on Lane’s face?

“Aren’t you?” he asks, voice carefully neutral.

“Cynthia, this really isn’t n’ssary.” Joan walks forward, almost stumbles, and quickly puts a hand against the wall to steady herself. “I’ve got it.”

Lane’s eyes widen, and he moves to help her. “Oh, dear.”

“’S okay. I can stand,” Joan tells him quickly, before he can do something silly like take her arm, or help her walk. "I'm okay here."

Cynthia seems at a loss, like she’s not sure what to say or do now that Lane is here. “Are you sure you’re all right? Kenny and I really don’t mind waiting for you to get your things. We’d be happy to put you in a cab.”

“No, I just wanna rest for awhile.” Joan waves a hand at Cynthia in a reassuring way. “Don’t worry. Lane’s with me.”

Lane says something she can’t hear at first. Joan does catch the tail end of the conversation once she starts concentrating.

“….I’ll get some food in her. Make sure she gets home safe.”

After a long moment, Cynthia nods.

“All right. If you’re sure.”

“Yes. Positive,” Joan turns an innocent look on Lane. “We’ll be fine.”

Cynthia seems uncertain, but she doesn’t say a word, just places Joan’s flask and purse onto the nearest armchair and waves at them both.
“Okay, well. Good night, you two.”

“And to you,” Lane offers as Cynthia walks back through the double doors.

**

Thankfully, once they drop Joan off, the car ride home is uneventful. Only weird thing that happens is that after about twenty minutes, Cynthia lifts her head from Ken’s shoulder with a soft, wordless exclamation.

“Are you sure they’re not sleeping together? Joan and her friend?”

Ken barks out a laugh that’s a little harsher than he intended. Lane and Joan? Yikes. “Oh, my god. No.”

“What? I’m just asking!” Cynthia huffs out a warm laugh against his neck. “They seemed very familiar.”

“Oh, they’re just cordial. Don’t get excited.”

“Hmph.” Cynthia doesn’t sound convinced, but she doesn’t say another word, just snuggles back down into his side.

They get quiet again as he drives them back over the Queensboro Bridge.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, poor Tony can't catch a break. It was funny; he's been in the story conceptually since the very beginning, and although I didn't know what drove him and Joan apart - at first - once I got to this scene it came to me almost all at once.

Also, I love writing Joan in denial for some reason. Nothing tickles me more than when she gets nervous and indecisive. It's so unlike her!

Three more chapters from here. Next up are some doozies!
Chapter 20

Right after Ken and his wife have gone, and the elevator doors slide closed, Joan tries to walk, immediately loses her balance, and crashes into Lane’s left side with an *oof!* of surprise.

He grunts under her sudden weight, and they both stagger sideways for a couple of seconds before he’s able to re-orient his footing and keep her steady.

“Good lord, woman. Calm yourself.”

“Shut up,” she murmurs playfully as she burrows into his shoulder and slips an arm round his middle. “Hi.”

“’Lo.” Gingerly, Lane returns her embrace. He’s never seen her have more than a couple of drinks before, so to find her in this state is a bit of a shock. “You’re having fun.”

“Oh, yeah.”

Joan releases him and grasps his hands in both of hers, gently swinging them from side to side as if they’re dancing.

Lane lets her toy with him for a moment before he tugs her forward. Perhaps they can walk to the creative lounge without a total mishap. “Here. Let’s just go this way.”

They stumble through reception’s mahogany doors and get within sight of the creative lounge before Joan’s heel turns under her. Lane lists to the right as she staggers for balance, but thankfully, she regains her equilibrium within seconds.

God, he’s thankful for all the walking he’s been doing lately. He barely sways on his feet as she drags him over to the sofa by one elbow.

Once Joan sits down, she pulls off her shoes, tosses them across the room, sinks into the sofa cushions with a deep sigh, and closes her eyes.

“All right?” he asks, trying to gauge her mood.

Joan’s eyes pop open, and she lifts her head up. Although she’s slouched against the back of the cushions like an awkward rag doll, the smirk on her face tells him that she’s still got her wits.

“I feel amazing.”

“Yes, I can tell.” Seeing her like this makes him grin, although he tries to hide his amusement, and keep serious. “How much did we have to drink this evening?”

She shrugs. “Don’t know. When was lunch?”

*Lunch?* He checks his watch. Almost nine o’clock. “Good lord.”

“Oh, it was just some gin in my tea. And then more without the tea.”

He’s still flabbergasted by the fact that she’s apparently on a bender. What the hell would have
driven her to do that?

“What on earth made you want to drink gin for eight consecutive hours?”

“Hey! ‘S really good.”

He can’t help snorting. “But how much did you drink?”

Joan glances back toward the edge of the lounge, where her shoes lie on the ground. “A lot.” With a giggle. “A whooooole lot.”

With that, she stretches out sideways, grabs the nearest pillow, and makes a happy, high-pitched noise before waving one hand in his direction.

“Flask’s over there if y’want any.”

Lane purses his mouth to hide a grin, and goes to search for her flask. Probably best to stop asking rational questions.

He’s still stunned when he finds the thing and it comes up completely dry.

“Erm. Joan.” He keeps his voice purposefully calm. “This is empty.”

“’S full when I left for the s’lon.”

Of course she doesn’t sound worried at all. Lane quickly tries to calculate a probable number of drinks. Flask holds six or eight ounces of gin, plus whatever she’d had at dinner, plus whatever she’d had at lunch. Or during lunch? Either way, she had better eat something, and soon.

“Right. Well, then. We’re going to get you some water. That’s first on the agenda.”

“Nooo. Don’t wanna.”

There are water glasses in his office, along with the leftover Chinese.

“Not optional, I’m afraid—although I’ll bring you out a little food as well. Think you can eat something?”

This pronouncement makes her sit up, wide-eyed.

“’M kind of hungry. I didn’t eat much dinner.”

“Good.”

**

Lane was right, Joan thinks as she stabs at a piece of beef with her plastic fork. Chinese food was an amazing idea. Jesus, this is good. How’d he get this delivered so fast?

“You know you’ve got sauce all over your arm,” he points out from his seat in the red wingback chair.

She squeals as a piece of green cloth flaps past the corner of the coffee table and into the floor, and
clutches the carton to her body with both hands.

“Don’t get it in the food!”

Lane laughs quietly as he walks over, picks the napkin up, and places it on the edge of the coffee table.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you like this.”

Joan makes a noise that means no. “I eat in front of you.”

“Well, I meant—”

“And I don’t eat in front of just anybody, so you—had better be—” she burps so loudly she doesn’t even have time to cover her mouth, and quickly puts the carton down with a wince. “Oh, my god. You didn’t hear that.”

“Hm? Hear what?”

He’s smiling at her. It makes the corners of his eyes crinkle up.

“Mmph.” Joan chews happily on a big bite for a few seconds, and glances down into the carton for a second before showing off some newly-speared vegetables on her fork. “I love water chestnuts. They’re so crunchy.”

His smile gets really big. “What else do you like?”

“Lots of things,” she says with a flounce.

Joan glances next door at Pete’s office—well. Pete’s old office. Maybe if she turned the hi-fi up as loud as it would go, they could still hear music in here.

“So what are you thinking about now?”

“Music.” She shoves the carton onto the coffee table, and pushes to her feet. “I want music.”

Stumbling out of Lane’s office, Joan whizzes around the corner and past the glass walls of the conference room. Although she almost falls on her face next to Caroline’s desk, she recovers just in time to get a hand on Pete’s doorframe, and try the knob. Unlocked. Yes!

“Why can’t you just use the record player in the lounge?” Lane’s right on her heels as she walks inside. “I don’t think we should be in here.”

“What? No. His hi-fi’s th’ best.”

Joan yanks open the top of the hi-fi, turns on the power, and winces as they’re nearly blown away by the shriek of violins. She quickly slaps at the volume knob until it’s at a more reasonable level.

“So loud it’s like Mozart died in there.”

Lane sounds like he enjoys her joke. When Joan looks over, he’s peering down into the hi-fi with an arched eyebrow. “Wasn’t aware one could catch flu from a record player.”

Joan taps him on the arm. He has to take a step back. Maybe it was too hard. “Hey. Hey, you remembered that. Small thing.”
“I did. So there's no need to shove me round.”

He taps her elbow with a smile, but doesn’t say anything else.

Humming a little, Joan twirls the tuner knob between two fingers as she searches for a good radio station. After a minute or so of nothing but twangy country and static, something good finally pops up. Song with a beat.

“You planning to dance, then?”

“Pfftt. I could dance all night if I wanted, and tha—that’s th’best idea you’ve had all week. Oh!” She grabs both of his forearms. “We should go to a piano bar. Sing the Great American Songbook. Would be fantastic. Don’t you think so?”

He bursts out laughing, shaking his head no. “You really don’t want to hear me sing.”

“Nooo,” Joan puts a hand in the center of his chest, trying to reassure him. She just stumbles forward instead. “C’mon. I bet you sound fine!”

“Well.” Two spots of pink flare in his cheeks. In the low light, it makes him look handsome instead of just flustered. “I can carry a tune, but that’s about it.”

“So what? ‘S just for fun,” Joan says as she pulls her hand away.

Lane ducks his head on another laugh. “Generally speaking, people don’t like singers to have the lung capacity of a newt.”

The word newt makes her want to giggle, but she bites back the urge, and nods her head yes, even as her lips twitch.

He’s being serious. She’ll be serious, too.

“No, don’t worry. We don’t hafta go anywhere. I mean—Peggy’s gotta copy.”

And Joan staggers back toward the doorway with a shriek of laughter, launching herself through it, with Lane right on her heels.

“Oh, lord. Be careful!”

**

“Now, we really shouldn’t be in here.”

Perched in the rickety rolling chair, Joan’s too busy rifling through the middle drawer of Peggy’s old desk to pay Lane much attention. He has no idea why she’s looking for a songbook in there; it’s filled to the brim with detritus.

Although it’s not on the bookshelf, either, so maybe she didn’t even have a copy to begin with. In Joan’s state, she may well have hallucinated the entire thing.

“Well, if I could just—get this—” she strains to pull open the bottom drawer “—the hell do they keep in here?”
“Are you still looking for the book?”

“No,” Joan’s actually, honest-to-god, pouting. Lane would tease her about it forever if it weren’t damned adorable. “I’m hungry. I want chips. They always have food.”

“There’s a vending machine just round the corner.”

“Ugh!” She sticks her tongue out, which startles a snort out of him. “I don’t wanna pay for them.”

“Yes. Resorting to petty crime is much better.”

They stare at each other. Joan mock-glares at him for a couple of seconds before Lane finally gives in, walks toward her chair, and motions her aside.

“Here. Let a sober person have a look at it.”

“Hmph.” She lets out a soft laugh, but doesn’t seem to be offended, just scrubs a palm between his shoulder blades. Her fingernails trace odd little curlicues into his jacket before she pulls her hand away. “Fine.”

Lane doesn’t trust himself to answer, so he just spends a couple of minutes fussing with the handle and the runner. Feels like something’s stuck in the tracks. On the millionth try—and after poking at one of the runners with the eraser of a pencil to unstick a piece of Lego—the drawer finally gives way.

The second it glides open; Joan shoos his hands aside and wraps her fingers around the reams of file folders on top. With a grunt, she lifts a large handful out and plunks it down onto the messy desk.

“You do realise those aren’t chips,” he reminds her, as she yanks out another heaping pile and deposits it on top of the first. “They’re going to know you’ve snooped.”

“What? No, ’s in reverse order. Jus’ read the—oh!”

With a victorious noise, she pulls out an object that’s smaller than her hand. Lane gets a passing look at it—some kind of candy package—before Joan rips a dark square piece from the wax sleeve, and tosses a scrap of wrapper aside.

“You ever tried this?” She clicks the candy between her back teeth and her tongue with a sharp sucking noise. “Ugh. It’s disgusting.”

Lane holds a hand out for the package. When Joan pushes it into his hand, he inspects the wrapper. Violet flavored. Looks like something a grandmother would eat.

Gingerly, he brings it to his nose; although it smells like a thousand sickly perfumes, it isn’t vile enough to make him ill, thank god. “Doesn’t seem particularly good.”

“It’s garbage.” Joan picks up the nearest bin by its lip, and spits her piece straight inside; the candy hits the plastic bin bottom with a loud thunk! Lane has to turn toward the bookshelf to keep a straight face. “Don’s the only one who buys it. Or bought it. Whatever.”

“Did he give some to the boys, then?”

“I don’t think so. Look.”

He turns to see Joan holding a battered notebook in one hand. In the open drawer lies a flattened shoebox lid, filled with little knickknacks: a pencil stub, movie tickets, and a dark tube of lipstick.
Joan pulls this out, uncaps it, and wrinkles her nose at the bright pink color. “Belle Jolie. I bet these are Peggy’s.” She huffs out an amused noise as she stares at the lipstick. “Too red for her.”

“Well, I’ll be sure to tell her that, next time I see her.”

No reply. Lane turns back to the bookshelf. He didn’t realize they had so many copies of Greek myths here. Who on earth is reading them? The boys really don’t seem like the type.

“Have you ever heard the story about the—?”

Joan sucks in a sharp breath. “Shit!”

“What?” Lane whirls around, expecting to see that she’s punctured herself using the scissors.

“What’s the matter?”

Instead, she’s waving him over to look inside the notebook.

“Look at this! It’s Peggy.”

His heart rate refuses to go back to normal, but grudgingly, he steps forward and peers down at the rough creamy page.

Bold pencil lines cut a petite female figure, sitting in a chair by a luxurious window, with a notepad balanced on her lap. The hotel room around her is barely more than a suggestion of heavy curtains and expensive furniture, but the svelte woman with the elven face still sits perched in the middle of the splendor like a satisfied cat: she leans backwards against the chair with her feet up. Her right leg is crossed over her left and both feet are propped against the middle of the table legs. She’s holding a pencil in her free hand, and smirking from ear to ear at nothing but air, as if poised to make some scathing observation.

She’s also completely—blithely—naked.

“Aah!” Lane flings one hand up to shield his face, and quickly turns away, his face blazing hot.

Joan’s not laughing anymore. She flips to the next drawing.

“Jesus. There’s probably eight or ten of these.”

“No.” Lane covers his eyes with a groan. Shouldn’t have snooped. Didn’t need to know this. “Don’t go through the rest of them! They’re obviously very private.”

“What? She didn’t pose for them!”

“Okay, well, she might’ve posed for the first one. But just look at ‘em. They’re not pinups.”

Lane just groans again, displeased. Never in a thousand years would he have wanted to see Peggy Olson without clothes.

“She’s still naked, you idiot.”

“And you’ll probably forget about it by lunchtime tomorrow. Just—” Joan hiccups, and excuses herself “—oops. ’S like the Pre-Raphaelites. You know?”

“Come again?”
“Pre-Raphaelites. But modern.”

This pronouncement may as well be in Greek, for all the good it’s doing. “I still don’t understand what that means.”

With a huff, Joan tugs at his wrist so he’s forced to walk a few steps closer. Lane sighs loudly, and braces himself to see some obscene picture, but when he looks down, he’s stunned at how classical this particular image appears.

There’s no one sticking bare bottoms in the air or trading explicit favors; here, the same woman as before hovers near the top right portion of the paper, extending one graceful hand toward the face of a bearded man kneeling at the bottom of the picture. This chap’s got no real features or body to speak of past his bare torso and the suggestion of thighs and knees, but Lane recognizes the awed tilt of his upturned gaze. Like a prayer.

Behind the woman, a dark billowing cloud lingers in the air, as if she’s descending directly from the night sky, and all throughout this dark diaphanous mass are curled scrawls of white—words or phrases, Lane supposes, although he can’t quite read them. They look like stars. And sketched in the lower right corner are shades of what appear to be discarded ads, torn and crushed underfoot. Lane can pick out a couple of men in old-fashioned collared shirts and empty-eyed cosmetics models, but that’s it.

She is naked, yes, but Joan’s right—there is a fantastic element to these that makes it feel less as if he’s spying through a keyhole and more as if he’s just walked into a museum exhibition. The way the picture’s drawn, she looks like some kind of wood nymph, or ancient goddess.

“They must have some kind of history,” is all Joan says, as she traces over the curled corners of the paper with two fingers.

“No,” Lane says in a low voice. When she turns shocked eyes on him, he just shrugs, and flings one hand toward the drawing. “I don’t think you imagine that if there’s not—?” He grimaces as the specific word fails him, and tries again. “Well, look at her. Way that’s all drawn. It’s—sad.”

“Hm.” Joan studies the drawing without looking up.

“Like he’s kept at a distance.”

She nods, clearly trying to think through this. “And she’s living with—with—which’s-his-name. Weird writer boyfriend.”

“Al,” Lane ventures after a moment. “Or, no. Ed.”

Short name. Strange boy.

Joan lets out a snort. “That’s not it.”

They fall quiet for a second. Lane thinks about Stan, about the sort of person who seems to take nothing seriously at first glance, and feels a strange rush of sympathy course through his chest. He must love – or have loved – her very much. And she didn’t even know. Or perhaps she didn’t want to know.

“Maybe she was his muse?” Joan flips another page. “Is it a modeling thing?”

That does sound like a rather artistic turn of events. Someone inspires your creativity and your abstract passion, only to later inspire your love.
“Suppose it’s possible.”

Joan starts snickering.

When Lane turns a puzzled glance on her, she quirks him a pleased smile.

“First time I met that girl, she was totally clueless. We—some of us used to call ‘er little church mouse.”

He arches a skeptical eyebrow. Last time the office bestowed a collective nickname on some poor soul, everyone called his secretary Moneypenny. And Mr. Hooker had been insistent on the source of the rumors.

“Did we?”

“Fine, it was me. I started it.” Joan rolls her eyes like she hates admitting something so juvenile, but after a moment, the contempt falls away, and a shy little smile lights up her face. “That girl really grows on you. She’s funny. An’ smart. An’ much prettier now that she doesn’t dress like a third grader. So maybe that’s—all that happened.”

Lane treasures the impish light in her eyes.

“That sounds more like it.”

Glancing back down to the notebook, Joan flips through several other pictures before she turns to the last page, gasps, and bolts upright in her seat.

“Whoa!”

She starts giggling. Her hand’s hiding the middle of the page, but Lane still glimpses a muscle-roped neck and thick shoulders bookended by splayed thighs, and draws his own conclusions about the rest.

“Ah.” His voice cracks on the next word. “I, er—I’ll just go see about the, erm, radio station.”

And he practically bolts from the room.

“Hey, where’re you going? I wasn’t gonna show it to you!”

“Can’t hear you!” Lane calls back as he sails into Pete’s office. “My turn to choose the music.”

“No, don’t—ow!” A loud thump echoes inside Peggy’s office, followed by some very colorful swearing. Lane winces as Joan scuttles out into the hallway. “Wait for me!”

**

This time, Lane chooses the music. Joan saunters in just as he’s turning up the volume on some old classical piece.

“I knew you’d pick that,” she says with a happy sigh, and glances around the room for an empty chair. “Hm. I wanna sit down.”
“Here. There’s a sofa right over—”

Joan ignores him, and totters toward the rolling chair. Two-thirds of the way there, and she trips on her hem, sails into the floor face-first, and starts cackling like a maniac as she rubs at her right arm.

“Shit! That hurt.”

Lane walks closer; his shoes squeak against the ground. “Here. You all right?”

“Fine.” She’s still lying on her stomach, and rolls over, a little dazed. “Phew. That’s gonna leave a mark.”

Before she can grab his outstretched hand, she notices an oblong object lying directly under Pete’s desk, and reaches out to drag it into the light.

When she realizes just what it is, she starts laughing again.

“I haven’t seen this thing in years!”

“Wha—no. No. Joan, give me that right now. I’m not joking.”

“Come on! Lane, it’s just a BB gun.” He yanks it from her grasp even as she's trying to show him that it's safe, so she hauls herself up from the floor with a huff. “It can’t hurt anybody.”

He’s already checking the barrel for the little thingies. Beads. BBs. “The hell it can’t. You could put an eye out. You could put my eye out.”

“Hey, ’m not stupid enough to point it at you! Tha’s safety one oh—one.”

“Oh, really? When have you ever been around guns?”

“Greg. Army. Hello? And f’your—for your information,” Joan sways alarmingly as she walks toward the hi-fi, and puts one hand on the side of Pete’s desk, “Daddy taught me how to shoot when I was a little girl. So I can handle myself.”

“You can barely stand up straight,” Lane puts the gun on top of Pete’s desk before straightening a couple of fallen pictures. “Have you gone shooting anytime in the last century, then?”

“No, but I used to be really good.” She frowns as she tries to remember when she’d seen Daddy last. “We’d line up a bunch of old soda cans on fenceposts, and get ‘em one right after the other. Target —” a hiccup “—shooting.”

“Didn’t alarm your neighbors, obviously.”

“Pffft.” Joan rolls her eyes. “Kansas, stupid. Neighbors have guns.”

Lane blinks. A wide grin unfurls across his face.

“I’m sorry. You’re from Kansas?”

“Plain ole Spokane,” Joan holds out her arms in a can you believe it gesture, triumphant, like she’s in the Miss America pageant. “And then Indiana, and then Virginia, and then here. Which’s the only one I claim, ’cause it’s the best.”

“Incredible.” He fumbles for his notebook with a weird giggle. “That’s—oh, I’m writing that down immediately.”
“Why?”

“Well, just—look at you.” He gestures at her with one flat-palmed hand. “You’re so elegant. Nobody would believe it.”

She smirks at him like he's just given her the compliment of a lifetime. “But I bet I can still shoot.”

“You couldn’t hit the broad side of a cliff in this condition.”

“Bet you five dollars I could.”

Lane harrumphs, and rolls his eyes in an overdramatic way.

“Yes. By all means, drive me to the nearest cliff. We’ll die screaming in the middle of Fifth Avenue, along with many other drivers and pedestrians.”

Joan slips a hand inside the neck of her dress for the mad money she always keeps there. And she also notices how quickly Lane looks away.

“Hey,” is all she says, “you get the cans. I’ll knock ‘em down.”

“Good lord.” When he finally looks back at her, she’s already fished five dollars out of her cleavage, and holds the bill high in the air, triumphant. “You cannot possibly be serious.”

“What? Are you afraid I’ll win?”

“Joan, I’m a man, not an eight year old boy,” he says with a heavy sigh. “I think I can let one boast stand for the evening.”

**

_Bang!_

A bit of dust explodes into the air as Joan misses her next shot; the seventh of ten cans stays motionless in its place in line.

Lane winces and recoils as the dust filters towards them. He’s so distracted he nearly drops his pocketwatch. “Don’t hit the drywall again. They’ll fine us.”

“Shut up!”

_Bang! Bang!_

Next shot hits the lumber pile; the little lead bead pings off and rolls away across the floor. Second one barely clips the edge of the ninth soda can, yet still sends it flying backwards into a pile of sawdust.

His eyes are fixed on the second hand of his pocketwatch. “Ten more seconds!”

If she’s going to beat his time, anyway. He’s less confident about winning now that he’s actually seen her shoot. If this is her performance while dead drunk, she must be rather good with a clear head.
“Hey! You’re making me miss!” She pulls the lever backwards again, sets the gun to her shoulder, and fires, hitting the last can dead-on.

Without warning, a thick stream of Coca Cola spews out from the side of it, spraying the dirty plastic sheet underneath in sticky brown syrup.

“Oh, god!” Joan tosses down the gun with a hoot, wobbles to her feet, and totters off toward the stairs. “That’s your fault.”

“Wh—no, it isn’t!” Lane just pitches his voice louder and points down at the gun as if he’s shouting to some nearby judge. “Yes, bad sportsmanship here! Contestant has—abandoned her weapon on the playing field—and got soda everywhere—"’

Joan is already clacking down the stairs with a bright guffaw of laughter. “Lane!”

“Well, you can’t just leave me up here!” he shouts back.

“’M not! We’re doing something else now, and it’s your turn to choose! Lemme change the music.”

Quickly, he picks up the airsoft pistol and hurries after her.

**

“Okay. I got it. Just throw the ball. ‘S gonna be fine.”

Lane’s frowning at her like he thinks she’s going to kill him, and walks a few steps closer. “Do you want to see the stance again?”

“How hard can it be?” Joan tightens her hands around the wooden bat’s handle. She raises the bat higher, but it wobbles precariously over her shoulder. “Wait, am I—is this too high up? I don’t wanna look stupid.”

“You don’t look stupid. Although—bit lower. There you are.”

’M gonna get a hit, right?”

“Mmm. Space your hands apart,” says Lane, peering at her hold. He pulls a satisfied face when Joan adjusts her hands, and glances back at him. “All right. Yeah. Let’s—first pitch is on its way.”

Joan tries to relax as Lane walks ten steps away from her and the giant couch cushion that’s serving as home plate.

“Coming up to bat next is Harris…had a hell of an evening so far. We’ll just see what she’s got up those giant sleeves of hers. Well. Sleeve.” With a grin, he gets settled, centers his feet, draws his arm back, and lobs the ball toward her in an obvious underhanded throw.

Joan swings wildly, misses, and winces as the wooden bat clatters away from her and rolls towards Lane’s feet.

“Oh! God, sorry.”

“No, it’s all right.” Lane picks up the bat and hands it back to her, handle-first. “May want to swing a
little later next time. You went too early.”

She scrunches her nose at him, frustrated. “Well, how long do I wait?”

“Longer than you think.” Lane walks back to the pitchers mound and gets into his stance again. “Ready?”

“Yeah, go.”

Joan hoists the bat high, although her arms get tired while she waits for Lane to throw the ball. Just pitch already. Pitch. Pitch.

“Throw it!”

“Steady on. I’ll heckle you in a minute, if you aren’t careful.”

With a satisfied noise, he tosses the ball to her again.

This time, Joan waits too long, panics, and ends up chopping at it with a wild yelp. The bat clangs against the floor, but the ball just sails over her shoulder. Luckily, it doesn’t do much more than tap against the crown molding.

“You hit me with that thing, I swear to god I’ll toss it down the elevator shaft.”

“But then you can’t win,” he points out calmly, as he crosses back to the makeshift pitcher’s mound. It’s one of Peggy’s books. “Because it’s a forfeit.”

She glares at him.

He just gives her a shit-eating grin.

“Shut up and pitch,” she teases, and brings the bat up to her shoulder again. “I’m really gonna do it this time.”

“That’s the spirit,” says Lane cheerfully, and tosses the ball—a little faster than before, but this time Joan waits a couple of seconds before clumsily swinging at it. To her surprise, the bat connects with a crack, and the ball goes thumping into the hallway behind Lane. It doesn’t even break the glass. Just zooms away!

She’s frozen in shock. “I did it!”

Lane wheezes with laughter at her surprise, practically bent over double. “Well, don’t just—stand there! Start running, you ninny!”

Oh, god. Joan takes off with a squeal, although she can’t really run in this dress. The best she can do is take tiny, hurried steps in her bare feet, all while hiking up the hem of her dress with one hand and flailing for balance with the other as she accidentally kicks first base into the conference room wall.

Rounding the corner, she almost stumbles into Caroline’s desk before realizes there’s no cushion on the floor between the two workspaces.

“Oh, my god! Where the hell is second base??”

“What?”

“Cheating!” Joan calls out as her fingers brush the side of a picture frame next to Dawn’s phone. It
falls, and tips one of her porcelain cats backwards. The cat falls to the floor with an ominous crunch. “That is—shit!”

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” Joan calls loudly, and keeps running. When she stomps on third base, gets to the final turn, and sees Lane waiting directly between her and home plate, baseball in hand, she lets out a high-pitched screech.

“No, no, no, no! Don’t get me, don’t get me!”

She doesn’t know what the hell to do—keep running? Tackle him? Run around him?

Lane feints left, then right, then bounds forward with a snicker.

In a blind panic, Joan dives right, but instead of sliding gracefully forward to touch home plate, she ends up skidding most of the way there on her side. The tile squeaks under her arm, and she winces as she comes to a stop.

Towering over her, Lane cocks his head to one side, and peers down at her with a bemused expression. He gives her a small wave once they lock eyes.

“Hello.”

“Hi.” Joan just smirks at him as she rolls onto her back. “I won.”

He nods toward something above her head.

“You’re not actually touching the plate. Need to do that, first.”

“What?” She lifts her head to verify this, and reaches her fingers forward just the smallest bit, still feeling nothing but air. “No, come on! I’m close.”

With one dusty wingtip, Lane pushes the cushion a couple of inches to the right. The lip of it nudges the top of her fingers.

“There. Now you are.”

She squawks out a disappointed noise. “Nooo. ‘S not as fun if you let me win.”

“Well, you did break the wall with that hit. Call it a home run.”

He’s smiling, but Joan can’t tell if he’s being serious.

Quickly, she sits up, looks around, and gasps when she notices a large gaping hole in the drywall, smack between creative and Lane’s office, a few feet from the drawers of Scarlett’s desk. Her hands fly to her mouth.

“Oh, my god.”

Lane tries to stop laughing when he sees the horror on her face. “Here. We’ll find something to fix it.”

“Don’t tell anyone,” she demands, as he helps her up and she dusts off her arms and dress. Wait, why is her arm all wet? Did she roll in some water?
He sucks in a breath through his teeth. “Good lord. What did you land on?”

“What?” Joan glances down and notices that a big trickle of blood is oozing down the side of her elbow. “Oh. There’s—” she takes a deep, shuddering breath “—first aid kit in the supply closet. Big one. Don’t make me look.”

“Ow!”

“Sorry.” Lane is in the middle of swabbing Joan’s elbow with an alcohol wipe. Who’d have thought rhinestones and a rather daring slide toward home plate wouldn’t mix? Or, more accurately, who’d have thought she would know how to slide for a home run? Quickly, he blows a stream of air at her wound, to soften the sting. “Any better?”

“Mm hm.” Joan’s still got her eyes closed. Her mouth tightens a little before she speaks. “Um. Is the blood gone?”

He quickly throws the wipe and the wrapper into a nearby bin, and tapes the large square of gauze to her wound.

“All done. Safe to open them now.”

She blinks her eyes open, and breathes a sigh of relief.

“I never realised you were afraid of blood,” Lane points out, as he takes a few steps backwards. Better to be careful. “Is it because of the, erm—thing? Accident?”

Whatever that tractor thing was.

“What? No.” Joan inspects the taped gauze on the side of her arm, and pushes her tattered sleeve back into place. “I don’t mind seeing blood when it’s other people’s. It’s just different when it’s mine. Does that sound weird?”

Lane runs his fingers over a couple of folios containing old advertisements. These are from nineteen sixty-one. Interesting.

“I suppose it could feel more alarming. You know, if you’re—really injured, on your own, that kind of thing.”

Glancing over, he notices Joan’s not quite looking at him.

“Once, when I was a little girl, I was home alone, and cut my hand paring an apple. We didn’t have any bandages or gauze, and I was afraid to get the dish towels all dirty.” She sniffs out a quiet laugh. “My mother came home and found me lying in the bathtub, crying my eyes out, with a stuck finger and an unwrapped roll of Northern Tissue. Apparently I thought I was going to die.”

This is the sweetest thing Lane’s ever heard. He tries to picture a very tiny Joan: in his mind, she’s a determined young thing with long, carrot-red hair, trying to make the best of what she thinks is a fatal injury. “That’s very dear.”

“Hmph. I was always too dramatic.”
“Was?” he inquires mildly.

Joan arches an eyebrow. He grins at her.

“If you weren’t now, my day would be far less interesting.”

She doesn’t say anything, so Lane goes back to glancing through the old ads. He’s just about to point out a ridiculous one for Lucky Strike, which – with this bare-chested chap relaxing in the hammock, looks more suited for a sunscreen commercial – when Joan clears her throat.

“What were you like, when you were younger? Do you remember?”

“You mean—as a child?”

“Mm hm.”

He takes a moment to consider the question. “Well, I—don’t have many memories of that time. Fortunately or unfortunately. Erm. Are you asking if I—well, if I could remember?”

“It wasn’t a test or anything.” Joan sighs and swings her feet as she adjusts position on the low bench. “I was just curious.”

This surprises him. “About what?”

There’s not enough room for him to sit next to her, so he just leans on the very tall, sheet-draped piece that sits off to one side of the bench. Probably just a nice chest of drawers or a bookcase or something.

“I wanted to know what you were like before I met you.”

Lane doesn’t understand why she sounds so wistful. “That would’ve been a very long time before.”

“Yeah.” She waves one hand in front of her face. “Sorry. It’s probably dumb.”

“Well, no.” Lane tries his damndest to think of something—anything. In lieu of agonizing over the blur of nothing that’s currently in his head, he takes out his journal, and flips backwards a few pages. The one he finds first has a few notations about the workday, and a list of chores, nothing exciting. “I—if I could—“

He’s about to apologize, but something about the way Joan shifts in her chair at that moment makes him think about her rumpled dress, and then about how she’ll wash the blood out of that sleeve, and then—and then—

Standing in the blazing sunshine on top of something very solid. A chair? A stepstool? And in his eye line billow rows of large white fabrics, seared bright white by the sun, each pinned to the line by two or three little wooden things. Clothespins.

And the white wicker basket’s next to his feet. Mother carried it on her hip. She didn’t want the bottom to get dirty.

“Lane?”

He gasps as he comes back to himself.

“Laundry,” he says with a deep breath, and laughs a little.
“What?”

He turns to look at her. “I used to help my mother hang the washing.”

Joan’s mouth drops open.

“She’d have this—enormous wicker basket that she’d carry everything in, from the tub, all the way out—well, behind the house, I suppose. And it was my job to pin everything to the line. And—”

another new detail pops out, so vivid it’s startling “—once it was dry, she’d have me lie down on the bed, and put all the warm things on top of me in a—you know, lumpy thing that’s all together.”

“A pile.”

“Yeah.” Lane huffs out another breath. “Pile.”

“You remembered all that?”

He can hardly believe it, either—and then he remembers his diary is facedown over his thigh. Lane quickly flips to an empty page, scrawls down as much of this as he can, and closes it. His hand folds gently over the back cover.

“Suppose that’s why Myra has me write things down. Just in case.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“We—when it was just the three of us: my mother, and Lewis and I—I think we might have been—happy. Truly.”

He doesn’t know why this certainty resonates so deeply, or why it makes him get so bloody maudlin. All Lane knows, for a brief, shining moment, is that he can remember his mother. God. He can almost see the smile on her face as she stands next to the narrow twin bed, and pours a basket of clean linens over his middle. He can almost remember the color of her hair. Pale and thin, like cornsilk.

Joan reaches out and puts a hand on his arm, and it’s only at that point that Lane realises he’s gotten very misty.

“Well.” He clears his throat, trying to get himself together. “Father and Charles came along later and ruined it, so.”

It’s not a particularly funny joke, but Lane can’t stand in front of this woman he loves, in a confined space, and carve out what’s left of his heart. He’s already too close to ruining everything. He keeps wanting to kiss her. She looks so beautiful under the light of this little desk lamp.

“Yeah.” She gives him an odd sort of smile, and pats his forearm a couple of times before pulling it away. “Sure.”

“Sorry. Were you—did you mean to say something?”

Joan gets up, and begins examining an object on one of the lower shelves. “Not really. I just had an idea. But we’ll need the tape recorder to do it.” She gestures toward a large, shadowy object near her knees. “Um. Could you get it from the back of the shelf?”

Oh. Is that all?

“If you like.”
After Lane gets the tape recorder plugged in, Joan presses the play button to make sure she’s not erasing anything important. She rolls her eyes as a familiar voice booms to life through the crackling speakers.

Okay. Shit. What number tape is this? A rustling, like Roger’s checking some papers. Seven? Jesus. All right, where was I? Oh, yeah. Queen of Perversions, nineteen twenty-eight. Now this was the first year I’d done anything with a woman, other than some hand stuff with a cousin of the Astors. Lina’s side, not Alva’s. Or, wait, was she the cousin of a Vanderbilt? He clears his throat. Caroline, double-check that. Anyway. Long and short of it is, twenty-eight was the year I started working in the family business, and finally figured out why my old man hated the Iron Lady so much. She wouldn’t spit on him if he were on fire. A loud snort. But she definitely liked me. I think I still have pictures of the bite marks somewhere—

“What the hell—” Lane looks dumbfounded as he clicks off the tape “—is this recording?”

Joan cracks up at his horrified expression. “Roger’s erotic memoir.”

“What.”

“You know, he’s talking about Ida Blankenship,” she continues, with a flounce of one shoulder. “She used to keep a nine-tails in the executive secretary’s closet. I thought it was a joke until I accidentally saw her use it on someone.”

Lane brays out a nervous laugh.

“And if you tell anyone about that—”

“Good god. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to repeat that story.”

“Too bad. ‘S pretty funny if you think about it.” She’s still chuckling. “Here. See if there’s a blank tape.”

Lane begins to search through the canisters.

“But aren’t you curious?” she asks, more loudly this time.

He pushes aside another spool of tape. “About what, the horsewhipping?”

“No. Roger’s writing a book,” Joan huffs. “Two books. Tell me I’m not the only one who thinks that’s ridiculous.”

“What are they even about?”

“Oh, one’s gonna be a type of—um—business guide. Bon mots, whatever. And he’s gonna call it Sterling’s Gold.”

Lane snickers loudly.

“I know. And the other’s th’ erotic memoir. Which I don’t think he’ll ever get published, if he keeps using that much detail.” Joan huffs out a laugh as she hooks the intercom into the recorder. “My god,
Ida was a masochist.

“Clearly. Only it—“ Lane glances back from the recorder to his telephone, eyebrows quirking up in a curious expression. “Hang on. What are we even doing with this?”

Joan’s smirk widens. “We’re making a prank phone call.”

He raises his eyebrows.

“You know, tell them they’ve won some contest and have to sing for their money?” She puts her hands to her mouth, but quickly yanks them back down. “I’m spoiling the surprise. We’re calling your brother.”

Lane still looks unconvinced. “Well, Lewis probably isn’t even home yet.”

“No,” Joan says. “I mean Charles. I have his number.”

He doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t even react, just blinks.

She lets out a bright guffaw. “Come on. We’ll make him tell us something really embarrassing. Or—or find out how much money he makes. Lead him on until we can’t even speak from laughing. I mean, wouldn’t that just be hilarious?”

He isn’t saying anything. She really thought he’d find it funny.

“Not really,” Lane finally says through a grimace.

Joan’s smile falls away from her face.

“What?”

“I don’t think—well. I don’t want to do that. Please.”

“You don’t want to?”

“Ah.” He lets out a deep sigh, scrubs a hand over his face. “Even if I—well, the idea of wheedling out some nasty secret—I just don’t like that sort of thing. And I wish you didn’t, either. It’s—forgive me for being blunt, but it just sounds awful.”

“Oh.”

For the first time all night, Joan feels like an idiot. Although she tries not to let him see how disappointed she is, the feeling must show on her face, because he’s watching her very carefully.

“Sorry. I know we said—whatever we wanted, but—”

“Yeah. No. We can do something else.” She waves away his concern, but winces as water springs to her eyes. “That’s fine.”

“Joan.”

“No, I’m really fine—it’s something in my eye. Um. I’m just going to—change the music.”

Quickly, she walks out of Lane’s office and into the hallway, biting her lip so she can keep herself focused.
Don’t cry over one stupid comment. You asked him what he wanted and he told you the truth. Why is that so sad? Don’t you want him to be honest with you?

I wanted him to laugh. I wanted him to be happy.

She doesn’t go back to Pete’s office. On the way there, she spies a pile of records on the floor next to the lounge record player, and spins toward the turntable so quickly that she almost loses her balance. But after a second, she recovers, and wobbles forward on careless legs.

Before long, she’s paged through the stack of records, thrown on something with Ella Fitzgerald on the cover, and plunked down beside the end table, leaning against the wall and hugging her knees to her chest.

Lane comes to find her after a few minutes, a puzzled look on his face. “Everything all right?”

“Fine,” she says with a shrug. “I’m just mad at myself.”

“Over the phone call? Whatever for?”

She lets out a sigh as he ambles over, trying to put this in a succinct way. “Do you think I’m a cruel person?”

He does a double-take.

“What? Who has?”

“Just—people,” she says, and stares sightlessly across the dim lounge, at the shadows of the furniture as they play across the tile floor. “I mean, I used to be that way. When I was younger. I’d say anything to anyone and claim they were just too weak to handle the truth. But I don’t do that now.”

“No.” Lane seems like he’s not sure how to ask his next question as he turns around, and gingerly takes a seat next to her. “Is this all because I didn’t want to phone my brother?”

“Not really,” Joan tells him, and sighs again. “It’s not about him. I just—”

The words stick on her tongue. She can’t say them.

He still looks concerned. “Tell me. If you want.”

She puts one palm against the floor to brace herself. The room is spinning. “I don’t know. It’s probably stupid.”

Joan can’t look at him yet; her feelings are probably written all over her face.

“What is?” he asks.

God, this is mortifying.

“I just wanted to make you laugh,” she admits, and when she looks up Lane’s staring at her like he’s never seen her before.

“You what?”

She shrugs.
“But—” he clears his throat—“why, particularly?”

Her eyes flick to his. The baffled frown he’s wearing makes her want to kiss him. How can he not know why?

Because it makes me happy when you’re happy.

“Does it really matter?”

Lane lets out a deep breath, and looks away before he meets her eyes again. “It’s important to me.”

Joan can’t stop herself from reacting. She leans in, puts her hands on his face, and kisses him, hard.

He makes a shocked noise against her lips, but after a second or two, he tilts his head—kisses her back—and then he pulls away.

Flushed and breathless, they lock eyes for a couple more seconds.

Immediately, she covers her mouth, and hides her face in his shoulder with a groan. “Oh, god, I’m sorry.”

He’s still breathing hard; his chest expands and contracts under her cheek.

“That was so stupid,” Joan grumbles to herself. “Sorry.”

“No.” Lane’s hands flex against her waist; one strokes over the small of her back. Does he know he’s doing that? “Erm. Once you’ve sobered up, neither of us will remember. So I, erm, wouldn’t worry.”

Her head snaps up so fast she almost clocks him in the jaw. She scuttles backwards to put a few inches of distance between them.

“What?”

“Well, you’re—you’re drunk,” Lane says again, very slowly, peering at her through his glasses with narrowed eyes. “And I—well, I’ll—probably forget, so you needn’t think that it—”

“Don’t!”

She means to say this quietly, the way you’d whisper to a friend in the movie theater, but it comes out loud and rushed and desperate. Joan wets her lips, and tries again, shutting her eyes for a second in sheer embarrassment.

“Please. I don’t want you to.”

Lane’s mouth drops open.

Joan has to look away. The lump in her throat is physically painful, and her heart is racing. Her chest feels like it’s going to burst open. Oh, god, he still hasn’t said a word. And for once in her life, she has no idea what to do next. All she can think is that she’s ruined everything. She’s drunk and dumb and she actually let herself believe that—

“Come here.”

She looks up.
He’s beckoning her closer with one hand. When she doesn’t move, he scoots left and carefully places an arm around her back. She’s so relieved that he isn’t angry that she puts her head down on his shoulder again, and lets out a loud sigh.

Okay. Okay.

They sit quietly for a minute or two. Joan just concentrates on breathing.

“’M kinda dizzy,” she mumbles into his shoulder.

“Yeah. Erm. Me as well.”

Joan lifts her head in alarm; apparently Lane takes this as a sign that she wants to get up, because he pulls his arm away and disentangles himself.

“Stay here for a moment,” he tells her in a low voice as he gets to his feet. “I’m just going to—”

With a secretive smile, he puts a finger to his lips, wheels around and marches straight into his office. He stays there for less than five seconds before he marches back, steals two of the couch cushions from the sofa in the lounge, and takes these back through the door.

“What’re you doing?” Joan stares at him, wide-eyed, as he comes back to the sofa and steals the last three cushions. He’s humming tunelessly to himself as he walks. She’s not sure he even knows he’s doing it.

“You’ll see,” he tells her again, but stops halfway across the lounge. “Erm. The—did I see the Christmas box in the storage closet, before?”

“What?”

She watches as he hurries back toward storage, but when he comes out, and shuts the door behind him, he stops in the middle of the hallway.

“Are your eyes closed?”

Joan squawks in protest.

“Just for a moment.” Lane’s voice echoes down the hallway. “Until I get everything ready.”

“All right,” she huffs, and puts her hands over her eyes—although when she peeks through her fingers, she sees Lane carrying a couple strings of Christmas lights in two hands. “I’m doing it!”

Chapter End Notes

Dudes, writing drunk Joan is the BEST. The BEST. Even though she and Lane refused to do anything except flirt and play around in this chapter. But I really wanted them to have a moment like this - something carefree and fun where they could act like idiots. Hopefully you guys enjoy it, too!
Dawn steps off the elevator and drags her floral scarf out of her hair, stifling a yawn as she checks her watch. Barely six in the morning, and she’s already gotten two emergency phone calls. Michael Ginsberg had better be laid out dead on the floor right now.

As it turns out, the first person she spots is Andrew, the head of the night cleaning crew. Dawn’s ready to push the door open with one gloved hand as she walks up, but Andrew hurries over to help, and opens it for her with a smile.

“Hello, Miss Chambers.”

“Mister Cook.” He’s got too much mischief in those twinkling eyes. Boy trying to gleam at her like Solomon Burke, even in that ugly old uniform. “Lot of phone calls for this time of morning.”

It’s nice that the crew has taken a shine to the office—Joan was very pleased by that development—but if Dawn had known going in that one little welcome gift was going to get them this much attention, she might have written a less cheerful card.

“Sure are.” Over Andrew’s shoulder, Dawn notices Michael sitting slumped on the sofa, his mouth set in an unhappy frown. “You know me, though. I always watch out for my favorites.”

This provokes a reaction out of Ginsberg for some reason. “Come on, man, I’m the one who called her!”

“My name’s not man,” Andrew snaps back.

Dawn raises a shocked eyebrow. *You really want to mouth off to a white boy like that? Even one as chicken-legged as Michael?*

She must look pretty irritated with him, because Andrew lets out a breath before he says anything else.

“Sorry. I’m not trying to get into it. Thought this fool had robbed the place, that’s all.”

Ginsberg looks outraged. “We got here at the same time!”

“Anyway, it’s in a state.” Andrew ignores Michael, and meets Dawn’s eyes with a knowing expression. “Figured one of the girls would want to hear about it before everyone else did.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Dawn says automatically, although her first thought is *oh, hell.* “Well. I’ll put up my coat, and then you two can show me what all the fuss is about.”

“Looking forward to it,” says Andrew, and punctuates that sentence with a wink. Dawn pretends not to see it. That old boy is too much. “Let me finish up the floor in here first, so Bruce won’t get on my case.”

Before she can take more than two steps toward the door, Michael jumps up from the sofa to dog at her heels, stomping next to her in his clown shoes as the floor polisher drones to life out in the
Those shoes are at least two sizes too big, Dawn thinks uncharitably as the door to reception creaks closed behind them. Somebody ought to take Michael aside and give him a few tips on how to dress. Maybe his father, or Stan. Somebody.

He’s already halfway into some diatribe.

“—why would he think I did this? Why would I trash this fucking place?”

It is too early in the morning to be fielding questions from this crazy man. Dawn lets out a brief sigh.

“Don’t say the f-word to me. I hate it.”

“Sorry,” Ginsberg says, but he doesn’t stop following her.

When they get a clear view of the lounge, Dawn gasps.

It really is in bad shape.

The sofa cushions are missing, first of all. A forty-five is spinning aimlessly on the turntable, and piles of records are strewn from here clear across creation. The round table’s been moved; one of the chairs is overturned and three others are unaccounted for. A baseball and wooden bat lie in front of the open door to Joan’s office, there is a hole in the plaster between Mr. Pryce’s office and the creatives’ office, and down near the conference room doorway, a big bike tire is lying on its side on the floor—without a bike to accompany it!

“Good lord,” says Dawn, completely flabbergasted.

“Yeah, it’s bad.” Michael scratches at his head. “Um. That guy—”

“Andrew,” she says absently.

“Yeah, Andrew. Uh. He wasn’t wrong about it looking like a robbery.”

She stares out at the sea of junk for a second, stunned almost beyond words. This is worse than some nasty house party.

“So you really have no idea who did this.”

“Dawn, I swear it wasn’t me.” Michael throws her a pleading look, like a kicked puppy, all big eyes and turned-down mouth. “I wouldn’t f—mess everything up like this. I just work early. Makes me concentrate better. That’s it. I swear.”

Dawn actually believes him. He’s still pretty pale, and judging by his reactions, the mess genuinely upsets him. Maybe he thinks he’s going to get blamed for it – and he wouldn’t be wrong about that.

He’s still talking a mile a minute. “Listen, I get that you have more important things to do than clean up other people’s garbage, but I didn’t want to call Joan in here, get you in trouble. I figured this was better. Is it not better?”

Dawn laughs before she can help it, peeling off her plaid scarf, and setting it down on the tabletop.

“Calling me in at five thirty. Sure. It’s dynamite.” With a huff, she throws her gloves on top of the pile. “You know if these morons got into any of the offices?”
Ginsberg pulls a shocked face. “I didn’t look.”

“All right. Well, shake a leg.” Dawn decides to start with the closest door. Producing her keys, she unlocks Mr. Crane’s office and peeks inside. Everything looks like it’s in place. She gives the room a quick once-over before closing and locking the door again. Well, that’s a mercy.

“What are you even looking for?” Ginsberg asks as they amble up to Mr. Pryce’s closed door.

“I don’t know.” Dawn tests the knob. Unlocked. That’s odd. “We’ll just—”

*Know it when we see it.*

She pushes it open, gets the barest glimpse of two clothed people lying on top of each other in the middle of the floor—long red hair spilling over a mussed white shirt—and has to clap one hand over her mouth to stop herself from shrieking.

Behind her, Michael crashes into her back with a wordless, panicked noise.

Quickly, they scuttle backwards and pull the door closed.

Dawn circles her free hand around Michael’s wrist and yanks him down the hallway into Mr. Draper’s office. Once the door shuts behind them, he lets loose.

“Holy shit. Oh my god.”

For once, Dawn doesn’t reprimand him. She just lets out a whine of frustration, mostly talking to herself. “It’s six in the damn morning.”

*All I wanted to do was stay in bed. Why couldn’t I have just stayed in bed?*

Ginsberg finally rounds on her.

“Are they sleeping together?” he demands first—and why *that* is his first question, Dawn has no idea. “Did she tell you about this?”

“Oh, of course,” Dawn retorts with a scoff. “We gab on the phone about it every night.”

“Oh, of course,” Dawn retorts with a scoff. “We gab on the phone about it every night.”

“Come on. Joan likes you. She tells you stuff!”

“Lord! Michael, she doesn’t say that much.” Dawn hugs her middle and rubs at her arms in an absent-minded way, although she isn’t cold. What the hell is she supposed to do now? “And she never breathed a word about Mr. Pryce.”

Ginsberg gapes at her.

“Oh.” Dawn bites her lip when she realized she’s said this out loud. What is wrong with her? “Shouldn’t have told you that. Don’t say anything.”

“No shit.” He scrubs two hands through his hair with a growl. “Ugh. Why would anyone in this place want to go out with each other?”

Dawn has to clap a hand over her mouth to stifle a loud guffaw. He realizes that’s how half these idiots got married, right?

“I mean, you’d have to see each other *all the time.* And dress all fancy and stuff every day so they didn’t know you had clothes with holes in them.”
She blinks at him, startled. “I don’t think that’s how that works.”

“Whatever. You know what I’m saying. Am I talking crazy, here?”

“No.” She breathes a sigh of relief. “I don’t approve of it, either. My friend Val is always trying to get me to find a beau from my desk.”

Michael lets out a short, clipped laugh. “Does she know they’re all assholes?”

Dawn pretends not to have heard that word, but she can’t help smiling at the broad characterization. Most of them – the men her age, especially – sure aren’t gentlemen. “Well. I’m the only one in our circle without any prospects. I guess she thinks she’s doing me a favor.”

“Why? You don’t need any help.”

She stares at him.

“Uh. I didn’t—my old man is always trying to set me up, too.” Ginsberg clears his throat. “I just meant I get what it’s like. Or whatever. People trying to tell you how to be normal.”

She relaxes. That’s nice of him to say.

“Well, least you’re not telling me to fling myself at Mr. Draper, unlike Val.”

“Jeeza marie.” He rolls his eyes. “No wonder it ticks you off.”

After a second, the mood turns serious again.

“What should I do?” She has never had to make a decision like this. Most of the time, the hardest part of her job is getting Mr. Draper off the sofa come six in the evening. “Everyone will be here soon.”


“I don’t know about that.”

Dawn prays for a moment of clarity. Maybe she can wake Joan up without getting her head bitten off? But then she’d have to actually go back in there. Oh, lord. She doesn’t even want to look at them. It’s too embarrassing.

“I guess I’ll tell Andrew to keep on with the floors, if you’ll pick up what you can in the lounge.” She pauses, and forces herself to admit that she needs his help. “If you can spare the time, I would appreciate it.”

“Yeah. Uh. No problem. I’m not—I got a few minutes.” He lets out a breath. “Who knows, maybe what’s-his-face’ll finally believe I didn’t do it. Might quit scowling at me like I just kicked his sister.”

Dawn shouldn’t laugh at this, but her mouth twitches up before she can help it. She just bites the inside of her cheek, and shoots Ginsberg a Look.

“Don’t say that to Andrew if you know what’s good for you. He’s got four sisters.”

And why he felt the need to share that with her was a mystery.

Ginsberg just smiles like he’s real pleased with himself.
Before he can wander off, Dawn taps his elbow with one hand, very quickly, to reinforce how grateful she is. “Thank you for helping me.”

“Oh, uh. Sure.”

After she nips out to the lobby to make sure Andrew knows he can finish up the floors, she steels her nerves, raises her hand, and knocks on the door of Mr. Pryce’s office. When she doesn’t get an answer, she opens it, and tries to look anywhere but at the makeshift pallet on the floor.

Thank god – thank god – it looks like Joan is already stirring.

Dawn still keeps her voice very, very quiet.

“Joan?”

When she hears her name, Joan yanks her head up from Mr. Pryce’s shoulder to blink blearily in Dawn’s direction. Her makeup is smeared under her eyes, the sleeve of her dress is bloodied and in tatters, and there are deep fabric creases all down one side of her cheek and the front of her neck.

Dawn keeps her face as neutral as possible.

“Are you awake?”

Joan doesn’t say anything, just nods, very slowly, and sits up. Wrinkled chiffon rustles behind her as she tries to untangle herself.

“Okay.” Dawn lets out a quiet breath, and decides she’s intruded long enough. “Let me know if you need anything. It’s quarter to seven.”

She steps out, closes the door behind her, and sags against the frame for half a second before opening her eyes and pushing to her feet.

There’s still a lot of work to be done before the day starts. And Lord knows Michael and Andrew can’t do it for her.

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Myra barely taps the door of Lane’s apartment with her knuckles before he yanks it open and practically drags her inside.

“Hi,” she says as she hands him her dark wool coat. He hangs it up for her, turns toward the living room, and then stops in place, mumbling to himself before heading into the kitchen. She pitches her voice a little louder as she follows him. “I’m glad I could fit you in. You seem worried.”

When she walks into the kitchen, he’s already pacing behind the counter, up and down in front of the stove.

“I—I don’t even know where to start.”

It’s the start of a panic attack, if Myra had to guess. But she doesn’t want to scare him. He’s not hyperventilating. He could still cut it off at the pass.
“Wiggle your fingers,” she says first. “Do they feel numb?”

Lane frowns down at his hands, and flexes them in an experimental way before answering. “No.”

“Good.” Myra gives him a sunny smile as she gets out her stenography pad. “I’m sorry. Would you mind getting me a glass of water? I walked all the way here from my last patient.”

“Oh. Sorry. Of course.” After a short pause, Lane crosses to the cabinet, takes a sturdy-looking mug from the cupboard, and pours water from a pitcher into it before handing it back to Myra.

“Get yourself one, too,” she urges gently, and watches as he pours the water. Steady hands—and the fine motor skills have gotten much better. That’s a good sign. It’ll help with the writing.

“Maybe some tea,” he mutters, and throws the tap on at full force before filling a water-spotted silver kettle.

Myra waits and watches him as he goes through his routine. Once he’s got the stove on and the teapot on the correct burner, she decides to start asking him questions.

“You having any suicidal thoughts?” she asks as she pulls out her notebook from her purse.

Lane sighs loudly. “Nothing worse than last time.”

“Okay. That’s good.”

Suicidal ideation is routine at his stage of recovery. And given his history of depression and internalized reactions to stress, passive ideation is above and beyond what anyone would expect.

“And how are you sleeping?”

“All right.” He seems to be relaxing, since she’s asking him the standard questions. “Some insomnia. Lying down earlier’s helped a bit.”

“Great.” Myra writes that down. “And your eating?”

“Less red meat.” Lane looks embarrassed, this time. “I’m not giving up all of it, so you may as well stop hounding me.”

“Didn’t think I’d turn you into a vegetarian. But you know how I feel about it.” Myra gestures toward his water as she lifts her glass. “Here. Make sure you’re hydrating.”

Lane takes a perfunctory sip, but it looks like the water barely touches his lips. He’s clearly wrapped up in thought as he puts the glass down.

“Want to tell me what’s going on?” she asks.

A visible ripple of stress practically pulls him upright like a marionette.

“I don’t know where to start.”

“Okay. Take me through the cliff notes, if that helps.”

A muscle in Lane’s jaw twitches as he considers what he wants to say. “Well. I, erm, saw Joan last night.”

Oh boy. Myra puts on her best patient face.
“Erm. She’d been out with some clients, and—gave me a ring, afterward. We met up at the office. I was working late. Trying to get some things done. And don’t lecture me about that, please.”

When Lane has something difficult to admit, he talks around it. Myra noticed this verbal tic early on, but it’s more obvious when he has to discuss personal feelings—particularly his love life.

“How did the work go?”

He ducks his head on a grimace. “Not well. Erm. Lost the papers I was preparing, found them again, and then Joan arrived not long after. She was very cheerful. Well. Tipsy. And we didn’t—there wasn’t any work, after that.”

*What’d you do, make out?* Myra wants to joke.

But she just takes another sip of water and waits for him to speak.

Lane’s still staring at his hands. After a second, he stutters out a short breath, like he barely believes the words that are coming out of his mouth.

“Lewis says that—that I’m in love with her.”

*Honey, your brother has intimacy issues the size of a Chrysler,* Myra wants to say, although he’s got a decent read on Lane for the most part. Given how close Lane and Joan are, she isn’t surprised that Lewis noticed something out of the ordinary. Or that Lane’s attachment to Joan made his poor brother insecure and jealous.

Lane keeps staring at her as if she ought to be able to solve this little riddle for him—as if he fakes ignorance for long enough, she’ll vocalize his feelings out loud so he won’t have to.

Uh uh. He’s gonna have to work for this one.

“And what do you think?”

Wordlessly, Lane puts his head in his hands.

Well, that’s something. At least he’s not in denial, unlike some people.

“Come on. Look at me. Tell me what happened.”

He lifts his head, but still won’t meet her eyes, and after a second, he digs his journal out of his jacket pocket, and thumbs through it until he gets to a specific page. When he traces one fingertip across the page, his eyes soften a little.

“It was only—“ he clears his throat “—we kissed. Erm. That’s really it.”

“Is it?”

“Mm.” He’s already pink-cheeked. “Sorry. I suppose it’s stupid to—I’m making a fuss out of nothing.”

He trails off.

Myra decides to encourage him. “When you’re divorced, starting over’s a big deal. Kissing is a big deal.”

“Yeah.” Lane’s mouth twitches. “Right.”
“But it makes you anxious.”

He shrugs. The stiffness returns to his shoulders.

“Well, it’s—before that, we just listened to music, had a little food, walked around the office. Being silly. Erm. And then we—after we—the two of us just started talking. Can’t remember everything that happened, but I—“

He bites off the end of his sentence, thinks for a second, and finally slides the journal across the table.

“Here. You can—if you want.”

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Standing in his pitch-dark office with the door closed, Lane surveys his handiwork with the desk lamp as best he can.

Not perfect, but it’s comfortable enough.

His red leather wingback chair sits in front of the sofa. The poor coffee table has been shunted over to the shared wall so the entire area between his desk and the furniture is free. He’s also draped a couple of strings of fairy lights all along the front edge of the sofa and up over the wingback chair, to give the room more ambiance. One blanket covers the top of all that in order to hide how shabby the bare sofa looks.

On the floor all around the chair, the cushions are arranged in as comfortable a lounge area as he could make, with a second blanket spread over the lot for good measure. If he could find a third blanket for warmth, they’d really be in business.

When he decides it’s finally ready, Lane calls out toward the lounge.

“Joan!”

She snorts out a laugh. “What?”

“You can come in now.”

“But you said you wanted me to close my eyes. I can’t do both!”

“God, you’re difficult.” Lane pretends to be cross, but he still goes out to get her. She’s sitting against the wall with her head tipped back against the glass, and when he’s within a couple of feet, her eyes flutter open, and her face lights up as he extends her a hand. “Come on. I’ll take you in, long as you don’t peek.”

“I won’t.”

Slowly, he walks her across the dark floor to the doorway of his office, with Joan giggling in a nervous way every few steps. By the time he guides her safely into the room, and closes the door behind her, his heart is hammering.

“Can I look now?” she asks quietly.
He nods, and then realizes she can’t see this. “Go on, then.”

As she opens her eyes, and takes in the scene, Lane savors the surprise dawning on her face. Her impish eyes shine in the low light; she squeezes his fingers tightly, and her mouth opens in a happy curve as she whispers “Oh, my god.”

“Well, it’s not just for looking,” he tells her, when she makes no move to sit down. “Sit wherever you like.”

She’s staring at the fairy lights in a dumbstruck way, a moth drawn to a flame. “If you’re trying to seduce me, it’s working.”

A sharp laugh tears from his throat.

“Think that’s—pushing my luck.”

“Maybe,” she says with a shrug and a sly smile.

Lane’s heart stutters in his chest.

“I wanna lay down,” she says, and plops down onto the cushions with a satisfied noise before stretching out on her back. Filmy green fabric billows across the pallet like gossamer wings as she flings her arms up over her head. “Don’t you?”

“Okay.” He moves to join her, lowering himself down to his knees first—trying not to think about everything they could do this way—and then lying next to her.

Once he’s settled on his back in a comfortable position, Joan rolls over and puts her head on his chest. After a moment, she begins to stroke one hand up and down his bicep, idly tracing lines just above his elbow.

“Your arms feel good.” An impressed note filters into her voice. “Are you going to the gym?”

“God, no. Put me in the pool for my physiotherapy.”

She makes an amused noise. “You hate swimming.”

“Not as much now,” Lane protests softly. “Start of it was bloody awful, but if the vertigo doesn’t flare up, it can be—it isn’t too bad. And it’s not all laps, anyway. Lots of—” he flexes his ankles in a circle “—aerobics and things.”

“Is it kind of like walking? Does it clear your head?”

“Mmm.” He puts an arm around her back; she shifts closer as he begins to trace an idle pattern up and down, up and down with one hand. “Less fun, though.”

They fall into a companionable silence.

“I could go to sleep here,” she admits.

“Me as well.” Lane smiles even though he can’t see her face, and lowers his voice to a playful pitch. “Wouldn’t mind cuddling up for a bit of a nap.”

“Cuddling,” Joan says dryly, and pulls back to arch a skeptical eyebrow at him. When she huffs out a low laugh, the vibrations reverberate through his entire body. “You know we could just make out, right?”
He had thought of that, too, but didn’t dare ask.

“Well, if you want to kiss me, you’ll just have to do it first.”

With a smirk, she leans forward and plants a kiss almost in the center of his chest. A bright pink lip print stands out bold against white cotton, next to the slick dark fabric of his waistcoat.

Lane’s entire body flushes hot as she does this again, and then strokes her thumb across that same spot. Staring down at his buttons, she traces her fingertips over his pectoral muscles in a studious way, and then flattens her palm against his chest, spreading her fingers wide. Her other hand comes up to rest on his shoulder. He’s sure she can feel his heart racing under her palm, but he doesn’t understand what she wants him to do, although her touch feels lovely.

The flirtatious silence suddenly turns serious and heavy. Lane’s sure if he says anything, Joan’s going to pretend it’s some trick of the light, act like it isn’t important.

He reaches up and cups her face with one hand in an attempt at encouragement.

“All right?”

Joan meets his gaze, startled, but relaxes a little when she realises what he’s doing. She lets him stroke a path from her temple to the apple of her cheek, over and over for nearly a minute, before she finally breaks the silence. One side of her hair comes undone, and tangles in a messy heap down her left shoulder.

“How?” she asks in a low voice.

“Well.” He clears his throat, and concentrates on explaining it the way Myra does, in a way that’s more clinical than terrifying. “Obviously when I—I tried it, in February, it seemed like there wasn’t another option. My state of mind was—very hopeless. And—that decision will always affect me, obviously. No going back.”

“No, it—it’s different now,” he says first, and tries to keep his touch as gentle as possible. Don’t scare her. “I don’t—I can’t say it never happens, strictly speaking, but it’s just—not like it was before.”

“Do you still think about killing yourself?” she finally asks.

Her eyes hold his, unblinking, even in the dark.

Lane’s careful not to stop moving his hand, although she probably feels him tense up underneath her, and slow his movements.

When he doesn’t answer right away, Joan averts her gaze, and takes a deep, shuddering breath.

“Okay.”

Lane forces himself to be calm, and quickly puts his other arm around her.

“Sorry. Can—you not look at me for this bit?”

Silently, she nods, and puts her head back down on his chest. He cards one hand through the side of her hair and says nothing for at least a minute before he can find his words again.
“I can still feel why I wanted to. If that makes sense. But it’s not as urgent anymore. Er. Sometimes it feels like it’s all happened to someone else. Far away.”

When Joan speaks, her voice is tentative.

“So you just—always have it inside you? That feeling? The sadness?”

“S’pose so.” He tries to put a name to this sensation. “Erm. Myra says it’s like an echo. You know. When you shout at the top of your lungs inside the right room, it has—immediate effects. You feel it. And hear it. And of course, after one second, two seconds, whatever, you’ll still understand why you shouted, whether it was for fun or to call out for help, but after a while you just hear your own voice coming back at you, smaller and smaller. Distorted. Erm. If you’re lucky, the sound disappears; you open the door and go on with your life. And if you aren’t—”

He breaks off. Clears his throat. Realises this may sound bloody depressing.

“Sorry. I don’t think I explain it as well as she does.”

Against his chest, Joan nods her head as if she understands, but even in the dark, Lane thinks she’s gone too quiet.

“Poor thing.” He rubs her shoulders a bit. “Sounds horrible, doesn’t it.”

She doesn’t answer. The silence stretches on for so long Lane almost says something else just to fill it, but before any words can leap from his mouth, she finally breaks the quiet.

“You’re so important to me.”

The shock is like plummeting into ice water.

“And I don’t know what I’d do if I lost you. That’s what upsets me.”

Above him, Joan keeps talking, and taps his chest with her fingertips like she’s mimicking the rhythm of his heartbeat. “When I found out … I thought that I’d hurt you. It made me – um. Well, I stopped eating. Cried all the time.” Her voice cracks. With a prickle of shock, Lane realises she’s close to tears. “And I missed you too much.”

He remembers that she visited him in hospital. And that she was worried. But he has never heard her talk about it this way. Like the fear consumed her.

“What?”

“Every day.” Her jaw twitches against his shirt, but he can’t tell if she’s frowning or smiling.

“Sorry. Um. I know you’re doing better, and you don’t need my help, but if you asked, I would. Anything in my power. I’d do it.”

“Joan.” He can hardly speak. “I—”

“Please.” She sits up very suddenly, grabbing one of his hands in hers. When her face catches the light, twinkling fairy patterns sparkle over her pale skin like little translucent stars. “I just need you to be happy.”

All Lane can think now is that he’s got to kiss her. He leans up and captures her lips over and over in a fierce, yet oddly fraught embrace.

Joan curls her fingers into his shirtfront with a desperate noise, but she doesn’t push him off, or pull
away.

She kisses him back.

“You’re so lovely to me,” he tells her between kisses, petting her face and her hair and brushing thin tears from the apples of her cheeks. Is she the one crying? Is he? Lane can’t tell in the dark. “So, so lovely.”

He’s too afraid to tell her the last thing on his mind.

I think I could face the world if you were with me.

Eventually, Joan pulls away with a loud sniff, and puts her head on his chest again. As they lie there in the dark, catching their breath under the soft glow of twinkling fairy lights, they don’t say a word.

Lane stares up at the little lights, one hand brushing up and down the middle of Joan’s back, until exhaustion overtakes him, and his eyes flutter closed.

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“What—what do you think it means?”

Myra studies the journal in her hand for another moment; regards the confident swirls and loops of Joan’s handwriting, just below Lane’s slanted letters, and the shocking pink lip print in the bottom right corner of the page. She moves her thumb, just slightly, as she adjusts her grip on the notebook. A little bit of wax smears across the ink and onto the tip of her finger.

“Honey, if you don’t know, I don’t know.”

His face falls.

“I’m serious,” Myra puts the notebook aside, watching how he tracks its every move. She’s going to have to make him dig deeper. “Only one of us is fluent in Joan. And I’m getting all of this secondhand.”

This coaxes a very thin smile out of him. She jerks her chin toward the open journal.

“You going to talk to her about this?”

“I don’t know.” He’s staring off into space. “God. I’m not even sure how to—I can’t—lose her.”

“Well, let’s look at it another way.” She fixes him with a significant look; his eyes dart to hers. “You care for her.”

Lane nods once.

“And she—based on what she’s said and done—cares for you.”

He nods again, but seems less sure this time, judging by the way his mouth thins into a line before he answers.

“And if you don’t talk to her about these feelings, you’ll never know what could happen.”
“Well, she—she might be open to it,” he argues. “I think she could.”

Lane has a surprisingly optimistic streak for someone who’s been chronically depressed for most of his life, and it honestly doesn’t take much for him to encourage himself, given the right frame of mind. All you have to do is shake him out of the decision paralysis. Or provoke him a little so the stubbornness kicks in.

“Sure. But she could also say no. And she won’t say squat until you two talk about it.” Myra lifts an eyebrow when he turns a withering glare on her, and enjoys being the devil’s advocate for a minute. “Don’t give me that look. A negative answer is a potential outcome. There are plenty of reasons people say no to good things.”

“But it could—see here, you’re being too pediatric. Christ. Pedantic. It could work. I know Joan, and—you agreed. You said you think she cares about me. And if she does care about me, if she—kissed me, then we can work things out together.”

“That’s a very healthy attitude to have. I’m not trying to discourage you. But you have had trouble addressing these things in the past—”

“Oh, don’t pretend you’re doing me a favor. You don’t even approve,” Lane snaps, and starts pacing behind the kitchen counter. “It’s one of your stupid bloody rules, isn’t it? Don’t have any relationships until you’re better.”

Myra’s mouth drops open. She quickly scrawls down a note in shorthand. “When on earth did I say that?”

Behind him, the teakettle starts to whistle.

“At the very beginning!” He fumbles for his notebook, carefully turns down the page featuring Joan’s message, and then flips to a page almost from the very beginning before showing her a laminated index card that’s taped to the inside of the notebook. “That. Your—ridiculous card thing.”

He quickly moves the teakettle from the burner, and turns off the stove.

As he’s pulling out a spoon from the silverware drawer, Myra takes the time to survey the index card. Typed in small, neat letters are three little dictums. She already knows these by heart. They’re guidelines for all of her patients who undergo a major health crisis.

1. Challenge your circumstances; don’t ignore them.
2. Give yourself permission to fail.
3. For at least a year, make your mental and physical health priority one.

Next to the third rule, in frankly awful script, is a notation in Lane’s handwriting that takes a second to decipher. What about moving forward? And an answer in her own handwriting: Let yourself heal first.

“You see!” Lane’s forgotten all about the tea, and has turned a smug expression on her now. He jabs a finger at the notebook. “It’s right there. You said you didn’t want me to try any of this until I was better.”

The conversation is coming back to her now, although it’s fuzzy.

Lane sitting across from her in his living room in a messy collared shirt and rumpled suit pants, pale and sickly and with burst blood vessels reddening his eyes, wheezing after every sentence. Demanding why he couldn’t just fix things with a pitiful apology letter, so that he could pretend the
whole affair never happened.

Like *that* was going to help him move past a suicide attempt.

“My advice was for you to wait a year before putting everyone else’s needs first. You wanted to send a typed form letter to half your social circle; including your ex-wife and your son, with no explanation or context other than ‘hello, I’m alive, don’t call me.’ Which I still have; you can read it if you want.”

Lane scoffs, but she can tell she’s struck a chord, because he just folds his arms across his chest and stares balefully at the clock on his stove.

She ticks off a small list off on her fingers. “Know what else you had trouble with at that point? This was maybe April. You could barely tie your shoes in less than two minutes. Or eat anything spicier than chicken and potatoes. Why would I tell you to throw all of that onto the back burner in favor of —?”

“All right, all right.” He rolls his eyes, and unfolds his arms. “You’ve made your point, haven’t you?”

“No, I haven’t.” Myra looks him dead in the eye. “I never said you would get better. I said you might adjust to a new life, whatever that meant. And right now, today, you’re very close to accomplishing that goal. What I don’t want is for you to lose all your progress in one fell swoop, because you get distracted by a woman.”

The churlish anger melts from his face. He blinks at her, owlish, as she keeps talking. She gentles her voice, so he understands that this isn’t an attack.

Whatever he decides, he needs to know that setbacks are not only a possibility, but also very probable. Especially once you bring a romantic partner into the picture.

“Look at the amount of work you’ve done. Whether you liked it or not, known it or not, you have made significant progress. And you’ve been honest with the people you care about.” Mostly. “I know patients who are still struggling to get out of bed every single day.”

Worry flashes across his face. “They don’t have anyone to help them.”

“Some don’t, some do.” Myra just shrugs. “You’ve been very fortunate.”

He doesn’t say anything.

She clears her throat. Time to get back to the subject at hand. “The reason I have that third rule is so people don’t lose themselves in lust, or love, or maybe something that they just think is love, six months after the fact, and bury their real problems.”

“Oh.” Lane frowns at her in a way that says he hates how her reasoning makes sense. “Well, I—see why you would encourage people to wait, but it’s different, with us.”

It’s not so different, but he’ll need to work that out on his own.

“No?”

“It isn’t,” he insists. “I mean, I do—she is—“ two pink spots appear in his cheeks “—desirable, but we’re not—I’m truthful with her. I’m not just flouting your rule for no reason.”
“But you’d still want to break it, even if you were.”

His eyes flash in a determined way behind his glasses. He meets her steady gaze across the counter without hesitation. “Yes.”

“Okay,” Myra begins, but Lane interrupts her.

“You don’t even like her, do you?”

A sharp laugh escapes her before she can stop it. “Who says that?”

“Erm.” He deflates a little, because she’s clearly so taken aback. “Well, you—the two of you got in a fight, or whatever.”

“Really?” Myra tilts her head to one side, curious. She had not expected Joan to talk about that. Being confronted with the truth had stung pretty hard. “What did she tell you?”

“Only that it happened, I think.” Lane looks surprised. “Why?”

Myra waves a hand in an it-doesn’t-matter gesture to conceal her disappointment. If Joan had gotten up the courage to admit that she was jealous, it would have been quite a step. That poor woman has been in denial about her feelings for a very long time.

“Well, then, you’re just going to have to discuss that, too.”

His surprise shifts into apprehension. “Oh, no.”

“Look, if you can’t even be honest about your feelings—”

“No, this is not about my bloody feelings! I am not walking up to her in the middle of the day, and blurting out a confession ten minutes before our next meeting.” He sets his jaw. “That’s—I’m not a schoolboy, damn it. It deserves—I get too—tongue-tied. And I can’t do it in the office. I won’t.”

“Okay. Then take another route.”

“Like what?” He slides two hands into his hair. “Notarized forms in bloody triplicate?”

“Talk to her outside of work. Write her a letter—a good one. Hire a blimp. Send her a telegram.”

“Ugh.” Lane puts his head down onto the table. “You’re horrible.”

Myra starts to laugh as she picks up her water glass. “And to think, you’re my favorite patient.”

He scoffs again. “Liar.”

“Ah.” She takes a sip of water. “You’re not so bad.”

**

Prodding gingerly at her throbbing right temple with two fingers, Joan actually jumps in her chair with a gasp when Meredith buzzes in from reception.

“Joan, you have a call on line one! Tony Blake.”
Oh, shit. Joan forces herself to stay sitting upright, instead of sliding underneath her desk the way she’s wanted to do all afternoon.

“Thank you,” she replies glumly. “I’ll take it.”

Two seconds later, the connection clicks to life. Joan winces as Tony’s voice booms through the earpiece.

“Hello, Joan?”

“Hi.” She tries to sound happy, although it’s not convincing at all. “This is a surprise. Um. I didn’t expect to hear from you.”

_Since you didn’t call._

“Yeah. Listen, I’m sorry about that. I, uh, was kind of nervous about talking to you again.” He laughs, strained and awkward. “Kept putting it off, you know? Wasn’t really sure what I was gonna say.”

“Sure.” She presses her fingertips to her forehead with her free hand. _Oh, god._ He’s going to yell at her. Or even worse, he’s going to forgive her—and then she’ll be up shit creek without a paddle.

“Um. I’m sorry things happened the way that they did, but you should—you should know that—you were right. What you said about me. And Lane.”

Tony sucks in an audible breath, but when he speaks again, it’s careful.

“Damn.” He exhales. “I was afraid of that.”

“Yeah.” Joan flushes all the way down to her toes. “Um. For the record, I do like you. I just—he and I—”

How the hell is she supposed to explain why it happened?

“Hey. Come on.” He’s forcing cheer into his voice. “Sometimes things just… don’t go the way we planned, you know?”

“I’m so sorry, Tony,” she says weakly. “I really am.”

“No.” He’s letting her down easy. Joan hates herself so much for dragging a nice man through the mud like this. “We, uh. You know. We tried it, things didn’t work, and now we…. well. Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay.”

Is it terrible that the only feeling coursing under her skin is a sickening relief?

“Anyway, I, uh, gotta go. But I just wanted to call and—you know. Check in, I guess.”

“Sure.” Frantically, she searches her brain for words other than _yeah._ “Thanks—thank you for calling. I mean it. You’re—” oh, god, why can’t she think of a compliment to save her life “—it’s so kind of you. Really.”

God. She can’t even come up with anything better than _you’re so kind._ Men hate that. How stupid can she be?

Meanwhile, Tony’s returned to as much professionalism as he can muster. “Yeah. Uh. Listen, you
take care of yourself. Goodbye.”

With that, he hangs up.

After a second, Joan shoves her handset next to the receiver. She slumps forward, slides out of her seat with a low whimper, and sits down right in the middle of the floor, hidden by the front of her desk. After another second, she puts her head on the seat of her chair. Around her, the room spins and tilts like a fairground funhouse. She places one hand against cold tile in an attempt to slow it all down.

Why does thinking about last night make her stomach clench?

You’re so important to me.

Why does admitting the truth terrify her so much?

Chapter End Notes

Yay, Ginsberg and Dawn! I waffled about what I wanted to happen with them in this part of the chapter, but the main idea stood strong - that he called her in early re: the disaster area. There's also a deleted scene I took out. Maybe I'll post a little sequel fic with some snippets if you guys are interested!

And oh, Lane and Joan. I wanted them to have super hot makeout times under the Christmas lights. They wanted to have serious conversations instead and hash this out ninety different ways. For those of you keeping score, that's Author 0; Characters 1.

Last chapter will be up Friday! And if you follow me on Tumblr, there will be a surprise post on Saturday with bonus material!
“Sad but true,” Margie pronounces as she walks into the conference room and slides three thick manila folders across the table. Her brown paisley tunic dress pulls awkwardly around her expansive stomach. Paired with that black turtleneck and the tan hose, she looks like a fat tree trunk on stilts. “I’m leaving all my projects in the hands of you two idiots.”

“Hey, nobody told Randy to get you pregnant again,” Stan replies mildly, although he barely looks up from this month’s expense reports.

She smacks him in the back of the head.

“Ow,” he complains, rubbing at his neck.

“You deserved that.” Moving slow and careful, Margie sits down on Ginsberg’s other side, and throws Ginzo a long-suffering look. “Kid, keep this idiot from shooting himself in the foot twenty-four/seven, will you?”

“Pfft.” Ginsberg pretends not to care one way or the other, but Stan can tell he likes it. That kid eats up positive attention with a spoon. “Yeah, I’ll get right on that.”

“Afternoon, everyone.” Dawn opens the door and slips into her seat. She has to hide a giant yawn behind one hand as she takes out her legal pad. “Oh. ‘M so sorry.”

Stan raises his eyebrows. “Long day?”

“You could say that.” She blinks at her notepad before visibly shaking her head, like she’s trying to snap herself awake. “Phew. Have we seen anyone else?”

“No.” Surprisingly, Ginzo’s the one who answers first. “Think Joan’s on a call or something.”

Yeah, right. Lane took a personal day and now Joan’s conveniently unavailable. That’s not suspicious at all.

“Oh, they’re probably just—”

Before he can say another word, Dawn levels him with a glare that could cut glass. Her voice stays even and calm, but it’s as forceful as he’s ever heard.

“You better not finish that sentence.”

“Shit!” He brays out a laugh before he can help it. This is kind of amazing. He’s never heard Dawn cop an attitude with anyone. “Chambers with the kay oh.”

“Finally!” Margie’s face is flushed; she looks happier than when she told them she was having
another kid. “Now I know who’s really gonna keep this bozo in line.”

Dawn shakes her head no, but the corners of her mouth still twitch up into a smile. “I don’t think so.”

“Sorry, Margie. I’m a full-time job,” Stan quips. “But we are taking applications. Tell your friends.”

Even Ginsberg is grinning. It’s pretty excellent.

**

That evening, after a much-needed lie-down and one of his pain pills, Lane spends an interminable amount of time staring at a blank piece of plain stationery before picking up his telephone and dialing the first person he can think of.

“Pryce,” says a deep voice after the operator puts him through.

Sadly, Lewis is the only other person he knows who might give him half-decent counsel, considering that the man has actually met Joan and has some idea of how things are between the two of them.

Lane doesn’t wait for his brother to say much else, just blurts it out.

“I’m writing a letter to Joan.”

“No, you’re not,” Lewis retorts.

“Augh! Why do you always—”

“Well, you’re on the phone avoiding the damn thing, obviously.”

“For god’s sake, Lewis. This is very serious, all right? I need—“ Lane gulps “—advice.”

Lewis lets out a sigh. “Whatever can you mean?”

“You know what I mean,” Lane says through gritted teeth. “I—it has come to my attention that I will have to—tell Joan things—and with luck we will—arrive at an understanding.”

“Golly, how romantic. What a lucky woman our Mrs. Harris is.”

“Will you bloody well stop it? I don’t know how to tell her, do I? Been staring at the damn paper for over an hour now!”

Maybe even two hours. At this point, Lane doesn’t even remember when he sat down at his desk.

Lewis sighs again, but thankfully, stops taking the piss out of him.

“Why on earth does it have to be done tonight?”

Lane pulls the receiver away from his ear with a groan. Should he say something about last night? Should he keep it to himself?

He decides to tell his brother some part of the truth.

“Because she went out with someone. Recently.” He winces as the words tumble out of his mouth.
“And if I don’t tell her what I’m thinking now, it’ll happen again, and again, and I’ll—lose her.”

Lewis doesn’t say anything for a few seconds.

“Was it one evening, or does she actually like the man?”

“Well, it doesn’t matter!” Lane hisses. Silence hangs over the other end of the line. “He’s an investment banker, for god’s sake. Just—horrid-looking. Smiling all the time. Only wants to sleep with her, probably, and I doubt he—the man can’t even get it up to try that much!”

His brother snorts out an amused noise. “Blackguard.”

“You make this sound very petty.”

“Because it is petty,” Lewis says in a flat voice. “You’re focusing on Captain Limpy when you ought to be focusing on her, aren’t you?”

Lane’s mouth drops open in outrage. “No, I’m not.”

“Bollocks. Even Mark says you are. Isn’t that right, Bryant?”

“What?” comes a faint, bemused voice in the background.

Rolling his eyes, Lane turns a scowl on the white blank page in front of him. “Of course I’m focused on her. I only meant—you know I’m not—good at putting it into the right words.”

“I’m aware of that, yes.”

This is kinder than Lane expected.

“Didn’t you faint dead away at Becky’s feet, when you proposed?”

“Anyway, the whole thing’s a very tricky business,” Lane continues loudly. “I mean, Joan deserves—I can tell that she—she needs someone to tend to her, same way she tends to everyone else. The fact that—Lewis, she looked out for me when no one else did. She gave me her friendship and her trust when I did not deserve them. And now… well, I could do it, you know, I could make her that happy—”

“Write all of that down, then.”

The remark is so devoid of sarcasm, facetiousness, or any other form of taunting that Lane can barely stammer out a reply.

“Sorry?”

“For god’s sake, little brother, say any or all of this to her, not me. Via Morse code or carrier pigeon or however you’re going to do it. Not half as bad as I feared.”

Is the man actually…complimenting him?

“What?”

“Now, for god’s sake, if you do write to her, be brief. Tell her you love her, what you want, and how you expect her to respond. Don’t fumble about with verses and musings and all the rest. She’s probably got bins full of those, from every chap who’s ever clapped eyes on her considerable talents.”
“You seem to have done this before,” Lane mutters, slightly alarmed at the ease with which this advice is dispensed.

Lewis just huffs out a laugh. “You've never known any actors, have you?”

“Erm,” Lane suddenly remembers that Mrs. Draper is, or was, an actor. Although he’s not sure if she qualifies as a proper thespian if he has never seen her in anything. “One, I suppose.”

“Well, they’re all very spirited, aren’t they? I’ll let you in on a little secret. Working in theatre’s rather like being in secondary school. Only with co-eds.”

The prospect makes Lane's blood run cold.

“But that still doesn’t—well, how do I begin the damn thing?”

Lewis huffs out a breath.

“Two words, little brother: dear Joan.” Followed by a breathy snicker. “If you get stuck, have a whiskey, and disconnect your telephone. In reverse order, mind.”

“But I—”

“Now don’t phone me back until you’ve stopped stalling.”

“Lewis! Stop being a blasted nuisance and kindly—”

*Click.*

That utter bastard.

Lane puts down the phone with a growl, leans forward, and gently knocks his forehead into the desk a couple of times. Sadly, this does not give him any divine inspiration, just makes his head swim.

After a second or two of wallowing in his misery, he unplugs the handset, and gets up to take an aspirin. Or to find the nearest bottle of whiskey.

**

“Joanie? Hello?”

Joan snaps to attention, and glances over at her mother, who’s peering at her from the other end of the couch with a narrow-eyed, curious expression. They’ve been watching TV for over an hour, but Joan hasn’t heard a word since the nightly news went off and the sitcoms came on. She’s just been staring in the general direction of the screen, barely catching a word.

“You’ve got that look on your face,” Gail says with a knowing smile, as she adjusts a wiggling Kevin in her lap.

“What look?”

Her mother just arches an eyebrow, and pulls the blanket tighter around Kevin’s middle. He’s got his head on her chest and is sucking his thumb, with his other hand wrapped around the chain of her
glasses. “Same one you got when you were six years old, following poor Baker Linetti around the grocer’s like an orphaned kitten.”

“Mom,” Joan groans. “For the last time, I did not follow him around.”

“You absolutely did. I remember you’d hide behind the meat counter so you could hug his spindly little legs.”

From her mother’s lap, Kevin giggles, and lifts up his head so he can imitate Joan’s theatrical groan. It comes out like a high-pitched growl. “Mama say rrrrr!”

“See? You’re protecting him. Even the baby notices.”

“Oh, my god.” Joan puts a hand over her eyes. “I need to take a shower.”

“Is it the good-looking one from your office?” her mother calls after her as Joan pads toward the bedroom in her bare feet, and shuts her bedroom door with a loud click.

Although she’s inventing a flimsy excuse just to get away, within a few seconds, Joan figures she might as well take advantage of the time alone.

She goes into the bathroom, skins off her clothes, turns on the hot water, and is luxuriating under the hard driving spray before she allows herself to admit she’s still thinking about Lane.

Even though she was blind drunk, Joan can still remember enough to make her blush. And they didn’t even sleep together, for god’s sake.

The warmth of the Christmas lights twinkling over their heads. Firm, pliable hands stroking down her back and over her sides. How feverishly she wished they’d slide down the rest of her body and up her skirt instead. How he’d swiped hot tears away from her face between kisses, pressed up against her in the dark.

Don’t think about crying. Don’t think about what you told him.

Getting caught by Dawn, of all people.

Jesus. So humiliating.

Pushing everything else aside for now, Joan concentrates on the shiver Lane’s fingers provoked as they trailed a loose path up and down her spine, and slides damp fingers past her slick stomach to recreate the feeling, slow and gentle. She imagines him undressing her piece by piece as she teases her most sensitive spot; imagines him kissing her until she’s half-drunk with need, suckling his way down her throat as they clutch at each other.

Lane will put his hand down her satin panties and press the heel of his palm against all of her, rubbing in slow circles until she’s soaking wet, until she can barely think for the stimulation. And he’ll be so hard for her, breathing shallow and quick, but waiting his turn as she grinds into the touch, patient, patient, until she’s this close to losing control. Then he’ll move his hand just a little, press his fingers up and inside until he—oh! right there, like—

She comes with a gasp, bent over at the waist with her free hand pressed against sweaty tile and steam filtering through the entire bathroom.

A few minutes later, as she rinses soap off of her chest and stomach, her mind drifts back to forbidden places, and this time, since no one is there to scrutinize her, she lets it wander wherever it
“Lane? Are you awake?”

He’s been so quiet for the last few minutes, and although his breathing is even, it’s not quite rhythmic in a way she thinks would mean he’s sleeping. And Joan can’t sleep, anyway. Her mind is buzzing.

She kissed Lane.

How could she possibly sleep now?

“Mm hm,” he mumbles. “Did you need something?”

“No.” She lets out a sigh of relief as she glances up toward his chin. “Just glad you’re up. I can’t sleep.”

His voice is a little scratchy when he speaks. Maybe he actually did doze for a minute or two.

“What’re you doing, then?”

“Thinking.”

Joan eyes the shadow that stretches across the floor, in front of the credenza. Is the sun rising, or is that just her imagination?

“Hm? About what?”

“Lots of things.” She repositions her head on his chest; he cards one hand through the messy part of her hair. Suddenly she feels like she should warn him about something specific. “I was mean to Myra this week. Did you know that?”

He seems surprised. “Were you?”

“Couple of days ago.” Joan braces herself for a lecture. She’d deserve it. “Um. I yelled at her. And that’s bad, but I couldn’t stand—” she bites her lip. “Anyway. It happened.”

“So… you just had a row?”

“Yeah. But don’t ask why, okay?”

“Oh.” He stills his hand. “Is it terribly awful?”

“Just embarrassing.” She can’t tell him she was jealous. Then she’ll be an even bigger idiot than before. “I’ll prob’ly tell you soon, but not now. ‘S too pitiful.”

“All right,” Lane says slowly, and taps an awkward rhythm on her shoulder with his free hand.

“Well. Changing the subject, then.”

“Hm.” Joan thinks for a second. What should she ask him? “Do you—”

“Is Tony Blake your—boyfriend, now?”

“What?” She jerks in surprise, and puts a palm to her forehead with a near-hysterical noise. “Oh, my god. Why the hell would you think that?”
Underneath her, he relaxes almost immediately, exhaling a sharp breath. “So you—the two of you didn’t—”

“Sleep together?”

Lane clears his throat, and shifts slightly; she has to rock her weight to her left in order to keep her head pillowed on his chest. When she glances up toward his face, he sounds distant, like he’s looking at the wall. All she can see is the tense curve of his neck. “I’m not asking that.”

“Well, you are,” Joan corrects archly, but shrugs. “Things didn’t go that far. There was a problem.”

“Oh. Oh, I see.”

He sounds thrilled.

“Stop that.” She taps his chest with one hand. He sounds like he’s smirking. “It’s not funny, Lane.”

“Joan, I promise I’m not laughing at you.”

“He’s a very nice man,” she insists.

“I’m sure he is,” Lane’s still trying not to giggle. She can feel his breath catch as he tries to talk. “Chap’s probably bearing it up as best he can, isn’t he.”

It wasn’t impotence. Joan bites the inside of her cheek to keep from saying the words that hover on the tip of her tongue. I wanted him to be you.

“It was too weird,” she says instead, and snuggles closer. She loves being here like this. Just the two of them, alone: talking, touching, kissing. It’s wonderful.

Lane presses his lips to the crown of her head in response. Joan closes her eyes in quiet delight.

“I should sleep, but I really don’t want to,” he tells her with a low chuckle.

She probably shouldn’t ask her next question. It’s too intrusive.

“Are you afraid you’ll forget something?”

Lane’s quiet as he considers this. She feels him breathe in, and breathe out; once, twice, three times, before he finally speaks.

“A bit. Don’t want to risk losing the small things.” He pauses for a moment. “Forgetting the important ones would be more difficult, I think.”

Oh. Well, they can fix that easily enough.

Without warning, Joan pushes up onto one elbow, and begins to feel around Lane’s shirt and trouser pockets for the thick rectangular indentation.

He flails in surprise. “Ah! Steady on.”

“Hey, I’m not feeling you up!” She pats down both sides of his hips with a cackle. Not yet, anyway. He gives her a pointed look that plainly says: too bad. “Where’d you put your journal?”

“What?” Lane glances left, and then right. “Er, don’t know. Perhaps my jacket?”
Joan cranes her neck around to peer at the desk, and thinks she sees his jacket hanging on the back of his desk chair. “Mmkay. Let me look.”

“Oh, no, but then you’ll have to get up—”

BAM!

What was that?

Joan blinks her eyes open, and frowns at the wall before reaching out and turning off the water. Stepping out onto her bathmat, she quickly dries herself off and wraps herself in a big blue towel before tucking it firmly around her body.

Once she opens the bathroom door and heads out into the bedroom, she spots the source of the noise—a little shadow in the hallway underneath her bedroom door, and a tiny chubby hand poking through the crack. Looks like he’s crouched down or sitting directly in front of it.

“Mama bath, Mama bath, Mama bath.”

BAM!

Kevin smacks the door again; it rattles in its frame. From this angle, it might just be by accident, so Joan only stops in front of the closed doorway, and assumes an innocent voice.

“Who’s outside here?”

“Me me me,” Kevin squeals in excitement as he scrabbles to his feet. “Hi, Mama! I right here!”

She unlocks the door, grunts as he rushes forward to hug her legs, and scoops him up into her arms.

“Hi, sweetie. Mama’s clean now.” She kisses the side of his head. “You ready for your bath?”

“With my duck!” He nuzzles into her neck with another squeal.

Well, thank god that’s a yes.

“Okay. Come on.” Joan walks them back toward the steamy bathroom, patting his back a little as they go. “Let’s scrub up so you can get ready for bed.”

**

The next day, slumped forward in his desk chair with his arms folded on top of the desk and his chin balanced on his arms, Lane lets out a forlorn whine as he stares at the sea of crumpled-up paper scattered across his line of sight.

Damned Lewis and his damned advice.

None of it worked. The aspirin only made him tired. And while the whiskey loosened him up, it unfortunately made him a bit longwinded. As a result, he wrote three horridly maudlin messages that, upon re-reading them, made his skin crawl.
Not good enough. Why couldn’t he just say something decent, damn it?

“Mr. Pryce?”

Lane sits up in alarm and accidentally spots ink onto one of the blank pages as Scarlett opens his office door and breezes inside.

“I need to mail this packet to the 4As before the post office closes,” she says as she offers him a clipboard. “Sign by the stickers, please.”

With a heavy sigh, Lane takes it from her and scrawls his name on the form in question, beside two directional stickers. May as well be useful to someone, since he apparently can’t put pen to paper without sounding like a complete ass.

Once that’s done, he hands back the clipboard.

“Take it over now, if you like. Wouldn’t want to miss your chance at the post office,” he says dryly.

She actually snorts. “On a Friday? Sure.”

Oh, my god. Wait.

Where on earth did his fountain pen go? Lane pushes several balled-up drafts aside as he searches for it, and finally locates the thing under a pile of old invoices.

“Well, er—you may go early, after you send that off.”

“Really?” she asks.

“Didn’t I just say so?” He’s already fumbling for a new sheet of paper, impatient. Don’t lose it, don’t lose it. Chances. “Whatever. Put my calls through to the service once you’ve gone. Just—see that I’m not disturbed.”

“Okay.”

She doesn’t ask any more questions, which is for the best. Lane needs the time to get his mind together.

As he goes to dip his pen in the inkwell, he nearly knocks the blasted thing over his desk. Lane’s heart leaps into his throat for a fraction of a second before he’s able to steady the small vial with his free hand.

Thank god. No accidents.

Once this is settled, Lane smooths his fingers across the bottom of the page before beginning the letter as simply as possible.

Joan—

**

Marking up a list of prospective accounts and barely managing to keep her mind from wandering,
Joan is flicking her earring back and forth along a small patch of her desk when she hears a knock on her door.

“Come in.”

Lane peeks around the doorframe. He’s got his hat in one hand and his coat slung over one arm.

“Not busy, are you?”

Joan glances at her desk clock. Three thirty. She can’t risk making a little joke, since he never leaves work this early, even on a Friday.

“Off to happy hour already?”

He lets out a rueful laugh. “Not exactly.”

She pushes her work to the side. Hopefully he’s doing something fun, and not going to court or to the dentist. “Well, what’s on the agenda? Anything exciting?”

“Hm. Rather a long story.” He jerks his chin toward her papers. “Are those very important?”

“Not at all.” Joan gestures to the chair in front of her. “If you want to sit, I could really use a break.”

“Ah. Well, I would, normally, but I’ve, er, got some things to attend to this afternoon.” His mouth twitches. “Just wanted to drop something off first.”

“Oh.” She deflates a little. “Okay.”

Her disappointment must be palpable, because Lane’s eyes widen behind his glasses.

When she speaks again, Joan just keeps her tone light, determined not to seem like an overeager little fool. It’s probably just the quarterly paperwork, or the expense reports.

“Must be important,” she says with a lift of one shoulder. “Last stop before you leave.”

She expects him to laugh, or at least smile, but he does neither. He just stands there unmoving, clearly in the middle of a heated internal debate, before he walks forward and places a sealed cream-colored envelope into her inbox.

It’s too small to be work-related. Joan blinks in surprise.

“I was going to give this to you,” is all he says as he nods toward her tray. He won’t meet her eyes.

“Before I left. Erm. So there you are.”

The air thickens between them, the longer she stares at that envelope.

“How long has he had it? When did he do this? Is this because of—?”

“Erm.” When their eyes meet, he gives her a half-smile. It’s very strained. “You can once I’ve gone. If you don’t mind waiting a bit.”

Her hands itch to pick up the envelope and tear it open with her fingernails, but Joan forces herself to be slow and purposeful as she gets out her letter opener, and sets the intricately carved stiletto next to her tea cup.
The blade is pointing straight toward Lane, like a little arrow.

“Take the weekend, if you like,” he adds after another moment, with a wave of one hand. “Whatever you need. It’s—self-explanatory.”

Her fingers twitch as she glances at the envelope again. She’s dying to read it, but forces herself to push the mounting anxiety aside, and to concentrate on the man in front of her.

_Oh, god, he’s so pale and nervous and he won’t look at me. Is this the moment? Is he going to say it out loud?_

“So you’re not going to avoid me until Monday?”

Lane’s mouth drops open slightly. He looks stunned that this is the first question out of her mouth.

“No. I only meant, you know where I’ll—I’m just going home. Unless I’m at the grocer’s.” He winces visibly. “Erm. I don’t spend all weekend there, obviously. That would be very pathetic. Probably illegal.”

She gives the joke a perfunctory laugh, but her heart is fluttering in her throat like a moth beating its wings against glass, quick and desperate, and it’s pulsing so loud in her ears she’s sure he can hear it, too.

“Okay,” she says slowly. She can’t tear her eyes away from his face. She’s trying to decipher every little twitch. “Enjoy your weekend at home.”

“Course. You as well.” He gives her that tense smile again. The longer they stare at each other, the more it morphs into something softer and more genuine. “Hopefully I’ll—see you later.”

He nods again, decisively this time, as if the motion has settled everything.

Before she can move another muscle, he skitters out into the hallway without another word.

Joan doesn’t even wait until the door closes before she snatches up the letter from her mail tray—so fast she accidentally knocks an empty bottle of club soda into the floor—and slices through the envelope flap in one clean stroke.

As she unfolds the stationery, careful not to rip the delicate textured paper, she braces herself for bitter disappointment.

_Maybe it’s not what you think_, she warns herself as she turns the page right side up, and reads her name on the first line. _Maybe it’s—_

Her eyes widen.

The voice in her head goes totally silent.

**

_“Knock knock,” Caroline calls out as she taps on Joanie’s door and pushes it open. “I’m getting ready to go—”_
When she sees Joan’s face, she stops short.

The poor girl is standing behind her desk, twisting her hands in front of her. She looks like she’s mid-step, clearly pacing. Her eyes are wild and a little too bright, her hands are trembling so hard Caroline can see them shake from this distance, and her mouth is pursed into a worried moue. Lying half-open on her desk is a plain, fairly brief letter. That must be what upset her.

“Honey, are you okay?”

Joan nods, blinking furiously, and taps her fingers to her mouth, like she’s about to burst out crying.

“Is it bad news?” Caroline quickly shuts the door.

Joan doesn’t say anything. After a pause, she lowers her hand.

“No. It’s good,” she says softly. Her mouth works before she can speak again. “Sorry. I have to go.”

As quick as you please, Joanie snatches the letter up from her desk, folds it back into fourths very carefully, and rushes past Caroline, toward her coat rack.

She yanks on her coat in a careless way, dropping the letter into her pocket once her arms are in the sleeves, but the poor girl can barely even get it closed because her hands are shaking so much.

“Well, you can’t leave in this condition,” Caroline steps forward to help her, as automatically as if Joan’s one of her own kids. “It’s supposed to keep snowing. You’ll get chilled.”

She drapes the woman’s scarf around her neck, and manages to get two buttons fastened before Joan comes back to herself, and briskly moves Caroline’s hands away from her coat, not unkindly.

“Sorry. I can’t wait.”

“All right, honey. If you’re sure.”

Caroline is positive the woman’s going to fly right out the door without so much as a goodbye, so when Joan turns around, flings two arms around her shoulders, and squeezes her in a hug, it stuns Caroline into silence.

“See you Monday,” Joan says in a rush, and lets go.

As she bustles down the hall, heels clicking sharply with every step, Caroline can’t help sticking her head out of the office door and calling after her.

“Be careful going home!”

**

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, the elevator is crawling downstairs at a snail’s pace, and even if there weren’t six other people standing in it, Joan would still want to slam the doors closed on every single person waiting on the other side. She taps her toe impatiently against the marble floor.

*We don’t have time for this! Nobody has time for this. Where the hell are all of you even going?!”*
When they finally get to the lobby, she stumbles out of the car with her scarf askew on her head, and accidentally clips an old man’s elbow with her purse as she hurries toward the revolving doors. Although he gives her a very dirty look, she doesn’t bother stopping. She doesn’t have a minute to lose.

Once she gets through the lobby, and joins a big group of people leaving the building through the revolving door, Joan decides to flag down the nearest cab the second her feet touch the sidewalk.

Instead, on the other side of the door, she walks smack into a frigid whirlwind, and recoils with a gasp as thick snowflakes swirl up into her face.

Everything is white.

Snow is falling thick and heavy around her; a thin skiff of it has already blanketed the ground. And as far as she can tell, the entirety of Sixth Avenue is a parking lot. The traffic jam might even extend all the way up to the park. Cars are honking and revving and at least ten drivers are leaning out of half-open doors and windows to scream at someone else a few feet ahead of them.

Some tourists crashed, probably. No one is moving.

Joan takes shelter against the side of the building, and runs through various options in her head. She can get a cab here, now, and wait in traffic for god knows how long. Or walk a block to another decent hub—Fifth Ave, probably—and get a cab there. Which might lead to the same issue, depending on the traffic patterns.

Or she could take the subway.

You can’t wait any longer. Why are you waiting?!

A freezing gust of wind blasts the bottom of her coat open.

“Damn it!”

Shivering, Joan fastens the last two buttons, adjusts her scarf, and pulls her collar tighter around her neck with one hand. She’s on the sidewalk and moving before she realizes she’s only wearing one of her gloves.

Where’s the other one? Glancing at the ground, she doesn’t find it, and looks to see if it’s still in her purse, which is secured and looped over her left arm.

No time. No time.

She sticks her ungloved hand into her pocket to keep it warm, and pats the folded edges of Lane’s letter against her side in a distracted way as she hurries toward Fifth and 53rd, stepping gingerly in her heels in the snow.

You stupid idiot, she thinks as one foot skids under her on the sidewalk half a block later, you’re going to break your neck.

Pausing, she sucks breath after breath of icy air into her lungs before steeling herself. The hell I will. Not until I see him.

By the time 53rd Street Station is in sight, she’s frantic, and has to repeat the words to herself as she clacks down the concrete stairs, fumbles in her purse for the emergency token she knows is still in there somewhere, and puts it into the turnstile.
As she spots another sign for the Jamaica Center platform, Joan breaks into a jog, and then a run. She doesn’t even stop running once she reaches the escalator, just clacks down the moving stairs like a herd of elephants, ignoring the bored or amused looks of the people around her.

The graffiti-covered train’s already pulling up to the eastbound platform; its brakes squeal loudly against the tracks as it barrels to a stop.

No, no, no, you’re not leaving without me!

Even at a run, she barely makes it on in time. Joan pitches into the car with a yelp, staggering towards a pole and grabbing it with outstretched hands as the automated doors slam closed behind her.

Holy shit.

Immediately, she glances around for the nearest empty seat, spies one hidden in the corner, and drops into it with a ragged breath. The sleeping teenager beside her doesn’t even flinch. Good. She’s barely paying attention to him, anyway. As the train gains speed, she pulls off her remaining glove so she can take Lane’s letter from her pocket and hold it in both hands.

She just likes looking at it.

Her eyes burn and fill as she scans the first few sentences again, but she refuses to let the tears fall. Not yet. Hold on.

Gently, Joan traces one fingertip over the thick lines of his letters. Lane’s handwriting isn’t like it was before. It used to be too pretty, like it was lifted out of some old-fashioned book, but now it’s a loopy, slanted scrawl that runs together when he’s writing very quickly.

He obviously wrote this quickly, too. There’s a huge inkblot in the upper right corner of the page.

As she stares at it, Joan wonders how she got so sentimental. If she were a decade younger, she would have hated that inkblot beyond all reason. But right now, today? She adores it.

Lane never does anything impulsively. He must have thought about what he was going to say for a long time. And nobody else has ever written her a letter like this. Not her husbands, or her boyfriends, or her lovers. No one.

Only him.

Hold on. She blinks back fresh tears as she folds his stationery back into fourths, and puts the paper safely in her pocket. Hold on.

A tinny, garbled voice echoes out over the loudspeaker as the train races down the tracks toward its destination.

“Next stop, Lexington and Fifty Third.”

**

Alone in his flat, Lane paces the length of the living room, first one way towards the windows, and then the other way towards the door.
She’s not coming yet she’s definitely not coming she hates you why the hell would you ever do this to yourself

He forces himself to stop and shut his eyes.

Joan doesn’t hate you. That’s a lie. She is your friend and she likes you.

Expelling a deep breath, Lane resumes his pacing again. He’s still not sure if she’ll come by today. Why the hell did he tell her she could take the weekend to reply? What in god’s name is wrong with him?

Because you didn’t want her to feel rushed. You’d rather get a positive answer after several days than a bad one after an hour.

And now you have to wait clear through Sunday to find out if she wants you. Brilliant decision. Very well done, you absolute imbecile.

He can’t call Lewis or Myra again. Lewis probably isn’t even awake yet, and Myra’s likely off with some patient.

Oh, damn it.

In desperation, Lane pulls out his journal from his pocket, and flips to the second most recent page. He’d copied the letter he wrote into it, as well, but that’s not what he wants to see at the moment.

What he wants – what he needs – is to see Joan and hear her voice, and looking at her handwriting is as close as he’s going to get at the moment.

Letting out a sigh, he lets himself linger over her miniature entry, with its beautiful calligraphic bubbles and points, and the little grouping of hearts she’d doodled in the left hand margin.

“What are you writing?”

She lifts the notebook up so he can only see the back cover and a bit of the spine, instead of the top of the pages. “It’s a secret.”

“I see.” He lets his hands tap out a beat against her waist as she continues writing. “Well, do censor it once you’re done.”

“Okay.” She taps the cap of the pen against her mouth, thoughtfully, before resuming her writing.

“Don’t take up the whole page.” He tries to seem stern, but the playacting doesn’t land at all. Mostly because he’s smiling too much. “I’ve still got to use this, you know.”

“Shush.” She flicks the pen nib in his direction with a sniff of amusement. “I’m gonna draw on you if you don’t let me finish.”

“Heaven forbid,” Lane says dryly, but he goes quiet anyway.

Joan writes a few more notations, then pauses for a long time, and purses her lips in order to blow air onto the page. She’s drying the ink. Lane realises. Mainly he just observes how beautifully kissable her mouth looks from this angle.

“You’re staring at my mouth,” she says after she’s exhaled two more deep breaths, and tests the ink
with the tip of her finger.

“Never.” Lane shakes his head. “Just your lipstick.”

Joan snorts out a laugh, then brightens.

“Wanna know what it’s called?”

He arches an eyebrow.

She scrunches up her nose as she grins at him. “Cherries In The Snow.”

“Well, write that down, too.” Lane tells her with a wink. “Case I need to know what color’s all over my shirt.”

She lets out a deep belly laugh, and drops her forehead to his chest for a few seconds before pulling her head up, righting his notebook, and bringing the page up to her mouth for a quick kiss.

“There,” she says primly. “Now it’s all on the record.”

“All right. Let me see it.”

Once she’s turned it around, and handed the diary off to him, he’s not able to read it very well. It’s still a bit too dark, and honestly, his head is beginning to throb from the lack of sleep.

Even so, Lane’s able to pick out most of the highlights, since Joan’s commentary is relatively brief. Below the date and time is her entry:

Tonight, I got totally blitzed during my client dinner and came to see you at the office. Why you were working this late is beyond me.

“Charming,” Lane drawls. “So glad to have this in the minutes.”

You and I ate Chinese food and horsed around the whole office. (Unless someone else is reading this, in which case, it wasn’t us!) We found erotic drawings of former coworkers, went target shooting in the empty floor upstairs, played baseball around the conference room using the sofa cushions as the bases (I won), and listened to records. You made us a pillow fort in your office. And I kissed you.

Next to the paragraph was her lipstick print, pink as could be.

“Well, I like everything you’ve put down so far,” he finally tells her. “Especially this kissing business.”

She’s already groping at his arm so he’ll hand her back the diary. “Wait. Here. One more thing, and then you can write something.”

Mock-grudgingly, he hands it over. She scribbles a few more words down with a flourish, and then gives it back to him.

Lane squints at her handwriting, and brings the book closer to his face. Sadly, he can read the capital C, and that’s it.

“Too small. Can’t make it out.”

Joan just snorts, grabs the diary, and tosses it a foot or so to her left. “Well, whatever. Read it
Absentmindedly, Lane taps the open page with two fingers. A fresh wave of hope surges in his chest as he scans the caption below her lipstick print.

*Cherries in the Snow for my favorite person. XOXO*

**

Why did she ever think taking the subway was a good idea?

Electrical work down the line meant she had to get off at Lexington. By the time Joan staggers up from the platform and back onto the street, the wind is whipping so hard it’s practically snowing sideways. Luck is with her, though, and she’s able to snag a taxi that’s just dropped someone else off.

As she tries to warm herself under the hiss of the car heater, every part of the last eleven months hits her at once, and a high-pitched sob claws its way out of her throat. Several hot tears drop to her lap, but thankfully, she gets herself under control before she loses her head completely. All she needs to do is dry her eyes.

Lane will worry once he sees she’s been crying.

Opening her purse to pull out her handkerchief, and avoiding the cabbie’s resigned gaze in the rearview mirror, Joan pushes aside a comb and her lipstick before her hand closes around the square of cotton.

When she pulls this out of her purse, the knot of tears in her throat suddenly dissolves into a sharp, hysterical laugh.

It’s dark red with a neat border of two white stripes, and technically, it’s not even hers at all. This is Lane’s handkerchief – a pocket square, really.

Why the hell does she have this? How long has she had it?

Joan swipes at her face in a distracted way, still giggling to herself, and balls that stupid scrap of fabric in one hand until her knuckles turn white. Jesus Christ. How has she not known all along?

She’s in love with him.

The cabbie is still looking at her. “You okay back there?”

“Yes.” Joan sniffs loudly, bites down on another laugh. “Please just hurry.”

As they speed toward Sutton Place, she closes her eyes and thinks of the paper that’s burning a hole in her pocket, about February and hospitals and tears and laughs and everything in between. Pictures his messy scrawl and imagines him scribbling away in a diner after lunch or in a doctor’s waiting room or at his kitchen table, frowning down at the page through thick NHS glasses.
She tosses the handkerchief in her lap and pulls out the letter so she can read it again, smoothing her fingers over the sharp creases as her eyes fly over the page.

Joan,

Tell me that this chance has not slipped through our fingers, and that your sweet feelings are just as they were the other night.

A rational man ought not ask for more than your friendship, but it is impossible to pretend that I love or admire or want you any less—I cannot!

Even when I was wretched and weak, you stayed by my side, and proved your dear nature beyond measure. You became a beacon for me in the darkest places, and now our bond is more precious than I can ever say.

By offering up my heart and affections, I hope to show you even a fraction of the tender warmth you have brought into my life.

Lovely dearest one. You deserve everything good in the world.

If such a hope is not impossible—if for a moment you return these feelings—then, my darling, come to me at once. One word or look will make me yours, for as long as you will have me.

xxxx  Lane

The cab slows to a stop; Joan looks up and notices the fourteen-story limestone and brick building is practically towering over her window, although the falling snow is so thick it obscures the slate grey portico covering the lobby doors.

Quickly, she puts Lane’s letter back into her pocket, pushes a few dollars at the driver, and clambers out of the car before anyone can help her. She barely stops to thank Lazlo the doorman as he holds the front door open.

“Hello, Mrs. Harris,” he calls out as she passes.

Striding through the second set of double doors without looking, Joan nearly collides with another woman who’s pushing a worn-looking pram through across the black and white marble-tiled lobby.

One wet foot skids under her, and she does fall this time, sitting down hard on unyielding cold ground while the young mother and baby roll past her, serene.

Damn black pumps! Joan pushes up from the floor, yanks her heels off one by one, and stalks over to the elevator with as much dignity as her raw nerves allow.

She slaps at the button with one gloved hand, but the only thing that greets her in return is the hum of
the car as it moves up or down.

After a few seconds, and a whole lot of nothing, her impatience gets the better of her; she veers right through the nearest hallway door, towards the plush carpeted stairwell. Walking will be faster.

By the time Joan bursts onto the fourth floor landing, she’s breathless, and in no time at all she’s standing in front of 4B with her heart in her throat and her heels gripped in her free hand, pounding on the front door like a maniac.

*Bam bam bam bam*

She has maybe ten seconds alone in the hallway before the front door bursts open, and suddenly Lane’s there. He hasn’t even changed out of his suit yet; the white collared shirt he wore this morning still has a dot of mustard on it from lunch, and his trousers are rumpled from an afternoon spent hunched over the ledger. And there’s a smudge on the bottom right lens of his glasses. He always pushes them up with one knuckle and gets fingerprints all over the edges.

“Dear god,” he blurs first, eyes widening.

Joan wants to hug him and never let go. Windblown and drenched, missing a glove, and all with mascara smudges under her eyes. She must look like an insane raccoon.

“Hi,” she manages to gasp out, steadying herself against the wall with one hand, and dropping her shoes by reflex. The patent heels clatter softly to the welcome mat. “Um, I lost a glove. And I have your handkerchief.”

His mouth opens and closes soundlessly as she pulls the cloth out of her pocket and waves it in front of him, practically under his nose. But he doesn’t even seem to notice; he just keeps glancing from her face down to her stocking feet, mouth still open, clearly bewildered.

“You—you’re not wearing shoes.”

Why is his confusion so adorable?

“I know.” Joan stumbles forward on jelly legs and throws her arms around his neck with a whimper; that prickly hysterical feeling brims up again, almost choking her. “But I had to see you—Lane, I just—I love—”

Her voice dies in her throat, and she puts a hand to her mouth.

“It’s all right. You’re here.” He sucks in a breath as he wraps her in a bone-crushing hug. She grabs the back of his shirt in two fists as he presses his palms to the nape of her neck and her hair and her shoulders, still babbling. “God. You’re really here.”

“Yeah.” Joan closes her eyes and lets the tears fall this time. “Yeah, I am.”

FIN

Chapter End Notes
Ah, I just love this chapter.

Lane's letter has always been a throughpoint for this story, because a) the man clearly loves writing down Things He Can't Say Aloud, and b) you just know that he's got an inner Frederick Wentworth dying to burst out. And I think Joan honestly wouldn't believe what he was saying or acknowledge her own feelings until it was right in front of her face, a la *Persuasion*. They're not a Regency romance-inspired pair for nothing! Although I kept getting mad because they decided to wait until the LAST. POSSIBLE. MINUTE. to reunite and declare their feelings out loud.

Some fun author notes:

I had a vague idea of what Lane's situation on Sutton Place was, but had to do a Google search in order to pin down a specific building/apartment number. Turns out, the building I chose randomly from Google Image Search - 444 East 57th Street - was in fact, the same Sutton Place locale where Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller lived and got married in the 50s. HOW PERFECT IS THAT. It's worth a gazillion dollars to rent now, of course. But I just loved the serendipity there.

I totally forgot Margie existed until she popped into the intro of this chapter. So that was handy for everyone! LOL. I guess it's just a rotating door of freelancers for SCDP, since they couldn't keep Peggy. Maybe Ginzo and Stan will have someone new to scare off.

Like I said before, I still have plenty of material archived up, so if you're interested in seeing ficlets from the same universe, let me know and I'll post them as one-shots as a sort of sequel.

Thanks for sticking with this story for so long. Ironically, when I started writing this thing, I was clinically depressed. And still am, I guess, but take medication for it now, which has helped a lot! So I hope it's been as positive a journey for you as it was for me. I promise my next story will not take four years to finish.

#

Please [drop by the archive and comment](mailto:dropbythearchiveandcomment) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!