

Chapter 1



O
ne.

Two.

Three.

Three deep breaths before I open the door to find that Leanne Hadley, my four o'clock, is nearly unrecognizable. Her endearing nest of hair has been tamed into a shiny bob, her mismatched sweatsuit replaced by a turtleneck and tailored slacks. She's wearing makeup, too. My heart sinks.

It's not that I'm surprised by Leanne's transformation, or by what it surely signifies. This is therapy, after all—we're working toward goodbye from the moment we say hello. But Leanne has come to see me every week since I opened my practice three months ago, and though I'm pleased by her evident progress, I'm going to miss her. Even in her grief, she has been excellent company. Her emotions are powerful; she's quick to cry but quicker to laugh, her sweet disposition spiked with wry wit.

Perhaps I look forward to her visits more than I should.

Not "visits," I remind myself. Sessions.

Anyway, it's over now; that much is clear before she even steps inside. She's practically glowing, back in the current of life, bobbing away from me.

"You look well," I say, smiling. I have to push the words out around the lump that has formed in my throat. Beyond Leanne, fastmoving fog rushes through Sutro Tower, the enormous red and white transmission antenna that stretches high above the city. To the east, the sky is blue; to the west, it's drained of color, as appealing as dishwater. Keeping track of the San Francisco weather is a battle I can't seem to win, and I'm eager to shut the door.

We follow our usual routine, Leanne taking her spot on the tufted gray couch in my livingroom slashoffice while I make her a cup of English breakfast tea. I know just how she likes it—sugary, with a drop of the cream that I started having delivered with my weekly groceries after she asked for it during our first session.

"Did you get a haircut?" I ask, making my way back to the living room. Afternoon light filters through the gauzy white curtains that I hung when I moved in four months ago and the effect is exactly as I'd hoped: cozy and intimate, peaceful without feeling solemn.

“No, I just blowdried it,” Leanne answers pleasantly. “I forgot how much better I feel when I bother to do it. It lifts my mood.”

“There’s a joke here somewhere,” I say. “Something about the similarities between hot air and therapy.”

Leanne has a wonderful laugh, bold and bright. When she tosses back her head, I notice that the dark circles that usually fall like shadows below her blue eyes are gone, faded by sleep and erased by makeup.

“Oh, Maggie,” she says. “You’ve been so good at helping me keep my humor through all of this.”

My stomach twists.

Patients are full of flattery right before they say goodbye.

a few nights after euthanizing Sealy, her elevenyearold Russian toy terrier, Leanne Hadley had done an Internet search using the words “dog” and “death” and “guilt” and eventually clicked her way to my pet bereavement counseling practice’s brandnew website. During our first session, she showed me a photograph of Sealy. Russian toy terriers, it turns out, are dainty little animals, shorthaired all over except for the long, crimped hair that trails like streamers from their upright triangle ears. Sealy appeared pert and pretty with a sharp nose and tufts of feathered strawberryblond hair.

Debbie Gibson, I’d thought. Identifying dogs’ famous doppelgängers is one of my particular skills. My own dog, Toby, a flat coated retriever mix, could have been the love child of Elizabeth Taylor (black, old Hollywood waves) and Bruce Willis (thick neck, sparkle in the eye)—though, in his later years, a strong resemblance to Ian McKellan (gray beard) had emerged.

Over the course of our first session I learned that Sealy was an emptynest consolation present from Leanne’s husband, Darren, after their youngest child left for college. Whenever Leanne watched television, Sealy would leap to the top of the couch and curl around the back of her head, as tight and light as a laurel leaf crown, periodically burrowing her cool, wet nose into Leanne’s hair for a good snuffle. In the car, Sealy preferred the backseat (“Driving Ms. Sealy,” Leanne joked). She performed a winning tap dance complete with a crazed, openmouthed grin whenever a can was opened in the kitchen, and would sulk below the table for a solid hour if the can turned out to contain something other than dog food. She tolerated Leanne carrying her, but no one else (“She had her dignity”). Sealy’s tiny toenails clacking against the hardwood floor, close on Leanne’s heels, had been the peppy backbeat of Leanne’s life for eleven years.

Leanne didn't leave her bedroom for two days after Sealy died. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment when she told me this. I assured her that her reaction was not uncommon; she wasn't alone.

"Love is love," I told her, as I tell all of my patients who are ashamed to find themselves shattered by the death of a dog. "Loss is loss."

She gave me a grateful smile, and I returned it.

now i open my notebook. "How was your week?"

"Good, thanks," Leanne says. Thirty years have passed since she left South Carolina, but she still has a lovely southern accent, as soft as her round face. "Lots of yard work. I pulled the driedup geraniums out of our patio boxes and planted some of that snazzy horsetail."

"What inspired the change?"

She takes a sip of tea, considering. "The time of year, I suppose. Spring is on the way, though you sure wouldn't know it from the weather." She looks down into her cup and a crease forms between her brows. "It's hard to believe I've been coming to see you . . . that Sealy's been gone three months. It still feels so . . ." She trails off.

"Three months is like the blink of an eye compared to thirteen"—I shake my head sharply, correcting myself—"eleven years of companionship."

Leanne's gaze flits to the rows of framed credentials that hang on the wall behind me—the bachelorofartsin psychology and master'sof scienceinclinicalpsychology diplomas, both from the University of Pennsylvania, the row of certifications and licenses from the National Board for Certified Counselors, the American Academy of Grief Counseling, and the PetLoss Grief Recovery Program. I've noticed the wall is a touchstone for my patients, a reminder of why we're now a part of one another's lives. It's my touchstone, too, though I wait until I'm alone in my apartment to look at it. On the best nights, those diplomas and certifications reassure me that despite recent developments indicating the contrary, I know what I'm doing. I am a skilled professional.

Leanne shifts her gaze back to meet mine. "The other big news from the week is that I was finally able to watch *Titanic*."

I glance down at my notes.

"Holy smokes!" she says. "I never told you the *Titanic* story?"

"I don't think so."

Leanne brightens. She's an enthusiastic storyteller, a trait she claims was encouraged by her childhood dog, Bert, a Great Dane who had tolerated her elaborate dressup

games and soliloquies with the stoic countenance of a Buckingham Palace guardsman being photographed by a drunken tourist.

“Well, the night Darren brought Sealy home,” Leanne says, settling back into the couch, “we watched the movie *Titanic*. And by that I mean *I* watched the movie while Darren sawed his way through a forest’s worth of logs. Our new puppy slept through the movie, too, curled up in the tiniest little ball on my lap. I remember petting her soft ears and thinking how crazy it was that I already loved her, how happy I was that there was another life in the house.” She shrugs. “Well, *you* know. I missed the kids a lot.”

“Yes,” I say. “And who wouldn’t fall in love with a sleeping puppy?”

“Exactly.” She smiles. “So she slept there on my lap through the whole movie until finally the credits rolled and Celine Dion started singing her big ‘My Heart Will Go On’ song.” She pauses. “You know the one, right?”

I begin singing dramatically, terribly, “*Neaaaar . . . Faaaar . . . Whereeeever you are—*”

Leanne laughs, begging me to stop. “I think you’ve got the right song,” she says, “but it’s hard to tell.”

I grin. “What happened next?”

“Well, the moment she heard Celine’s voice, Sealy, who had been sound asleep on my lap, *sprang* onto her tiny paws, pointed her nose at the ceiling, and let loose the sweetest, crooning, elfin puppy howl the world has ever heard.”

“So Sealy is short for Celine?” I’d always assumed Sealy’s spray of black, seallike whiskers had inspired her name.

Leanne nods. “In her whole life, for the next eleven years, I never heard her howl at anyone or anything else. Only Celine Dion.”

“Do you think it was a sign of pleasure or agony?”

Leanne laughs. “Pleasure. Definitely pleasure. I think she thought Celine Dion had the most beautiful howl she’d ever heard. It moved her.”

“Did you ever play her any Whitney Houston? Mariah Carey? Maybe she had a thing for divas.”

“No, no, no,” Leanne says through her laughter. “It was just Celine.”

I nod, allowing a pause to fill the room. “What a gift.”

She gives me a questioning look.

“These memories,” I say. “They’ll always be with you. They’re the part of Sealy that has become a part of you.”

Leanne’s eyes glisten. I can tell she’s already thinking of another story and so I lean forward, happy there’s more to tell, ready to take it in.

Pet bereavement counselors hear a lot of happy stories. This always seems to surprise people, who assume sessions are soggy, heartwrenching undertakings. Sure, there are tears, but there are also the stories of the dogs that made people feel less alone, the dogs that taught them about love, that made their hearts feel bigger and stronger. And dog people—the majority of my patients are dog people—have wonderful senses of humor. Some of the funniest, most uplifting stories I’ve ever heard have come from my patients. They’re an eclectic bunch, but the stories they tell have the same simple truth at their core: dogs make us better.

A lot of the counseling I do is as straightforward as honoring these stories—the happy ones and the sad ones. The stories commemorate the life. We laugh; we cry; we get it all out there. Often we discover that there are issues at play beyond the loss of a pet.

Emotions can be sly. Years can go by before you discover the pain that lives inside of you, a spiky old barnacle clinging to your heart.

At the close of our session, I’m determined to walk Leanne all the way up the path that leads from my apartment door to the gate at the sidewalk, but with each step a now familiar sense of dread builds within me. My heart pounds. I hide the tremble in my hands by pressing them into the pockets of my blazer.

In my chest, panic is a small dark bird threatening to spread her wings.

When I open the gate, Leanne walks through it and turns to wrap me in a hug. She’s on the sidewalk and I’m on the last stepping stone of the path, so our hug starts out kind of loose and awkward, but then she shuffles toward me and closes the gap between us.

“Thank you for everything, Maggie,” she says near my ear. “Truly, thank you.”

I’m afraid she can feel how fast my heart is beating. I try to focus on the palm tree across the street, but suddenly the wind picks up and the tree groans, its dark, misshapen shadows morphing into wounded animals that thrash against the pavement. I close my eyes and suppress an involuntary shudder. Or maybe I don’t, because when I open my eyes I see that Leanne is pulling away, a crease denting her brow.

“Are you okay?” she asks, her hands on my shoulders.

“Of course!” My voice comes out breathless. It seems to me that the sky is darkening and I’m not sure how much longer I can stand there at the gate. I take her hands in mine and squeeze them, feeling her newly manicured fingernails press into my palms, and wish her well.

Leanne’s face softens into a smile, but I can tell there’s still a note of concern there, so I force myself to stay and watch as she searches in her bag for her car keys and then noses her old green Mercedes back and forth what seems like a hundred times, providing plenty of ammunition for my theory that there’s an inverse correlation between driving skill and vehicle size. When she finally frees the car from its parking spot, she beeps and gives a jaunty wave. I plaster on a grin and wave both of my trembling hands in the air above my head. It’s only when I catch a glimpse Leanne’s face screwing into a puzzled expression that I realize I must look like one of those people who direct planes out of airport gates. Or maybe a Bhangra dancer.

I wait until her car turns out of sight before spinning around and hurrying back down the path to my apartment.

The relief floods through me as soon as I’m inside. I make a beeline for the bathroom and scrub my hands in the sink. Leanne looked like the picture of health, but you never know the truth until it’s too late. The water is so hot that my skin turns pink. I persevere, humming the “Happy Birthday” song twice under my breath—a handy little tip I picked up during a recent study of the Centers for Disease Control’s website. When I read the CDC’s advice, I immediately wondered if my mother knew it. I managed to stop myself from calling her in Philadelphia and asking, but I can’t stop myself from thinking of her every time I put my hands below that scalding water and watch my skin change color.

I shut off the water and listen as my shallow, uneven breathing slowly quiets.

Ninety-eight, I think.

I look at my reflection in the mirror above the sink. I’m paler now than I was when I moved here, but my eyebrows are unchanged: ambercolored, well defined, expressive. My best friend, Lourdes, tells me I have trustworthy brows. She calls them my moneymakers. Who knows? She might be right. Even the most reticent patient eventually reveals her secrets to me . . . black pieces of coal held so tight they’ve turned into sharp, gleaming diamonds.

“Ninetyeight,” I say aloud. It’s an interesting number, the silky shimmy of ninety, the slammed door of eight. I say the number again. Tomorrow a new one will take its place and it seems important I keep track. “Ninetyeight.”

It’s been ninetyeight days since I set foot beyond that gate at the sidewalk.

Chapter 2



I blame Google.

I'm kidding, of course. I'm a therapist; I know I can't pin

this on the Internet. But it *is* true that the logistical difficulties of not being able to leave your home practically disappear when you fall into the welcoming embrace of the World Wide Web. Groceries, books, vitamins and supplements, even alcohol . . . they can all be delivered. The Internet enables me with the fauxcasual finesse of a beadyeyed drug dealer. *No need to leave*, Amazon purrs when I run low on antibacterial hand soap. *I'll have a box on your doorstep tomorrow*.

In my friend Lourdes's version of my life story, she is the one who pried me out of Philadelphia four months ago, yanking me from yet another of the sort of deadend relationships I seem to be particularly skilled at cultivating, and from a job that, while satisfying, never felt like the exact right fit. I let Lourdes believe she was responsible for my move because there's some truth to the claim—I am, after all, now renting the firstfloor apartment of her San Francisco home. There's no need to burst her balloon, no need to assert that the real catalyst for the life change was my dog, Toby.

After graduate school, I'd accepted a counseling position in Philadelphia Hospital's grief clinic. I stayed there for seven years, but it wasn't until I began volunteering after work as a pet bereavement counselor at the SPCA that I experienced an "Aha Moment" that would have made Oprah proud. Helping people who'd lost their beloved pets felt like my true calling, the one that aligned my training and experience and personal interests.

By personal interests, I mean dogs. I've always loved dogs. You know how some people can't pass a baby without stopping to coo in his pudgy little face? I'm like that with dogs. And puppies? Forget it. I'm convinced that petting a puppy is good luck. Some people rub Buddha bellies; I pet puppies. I've been known to trail a puppy for blocks just to have the chance. It seems to me that believing in the luck of puppies makes a lot more sense than believing in, say, a lucky number. Can a number remind you of the power of pure, unconditional love? Can a number embody loyalty or joie de vivre or goodness or friendship or . . . Well, you get my drift. I love dogs.

Despite the strong sense that I was meant to be working with other animal lovers, I held on to the hospital job because I felt a responsibility to my patients and it was

steady work that paid well and I had a comfortable, if not particularly exciting, routine in place. It's hard for me to accept change (for this, like all good therapists, I blame my parents). Besides, pet bereavement is not exactly a cash cow as far as therapy niches go. The idea remained stuck in pipe dream territory for a long time.

John, my boyfriend back then, didn't support the career shift either. He'd been cagey regarding his feelings about animals during the early months of our relationship, but I sometimes believed I saw his welltended hair rise a quarter of an inch when I spoke of my dog, Toby. It was like he was literally bristling—like a dog raising his hackles when he senses danger. John was needy in the way of a lot of wellcoiffed, handsome men; I don't think he could handle sharing the limelight, or even just my affection, with a dog. So, in a way, I'd known John and I were ill matched almost from the start, but once I embrace someone, it's hard for me to let go. I began to think of John's forthright selfcenteredness as a lovable quirk, not unlike when my paternal grandfather died and at his funeral I found myself speaking fondly of his unapologetically thunderous burps.

Still, everything was relatively fine until what I've come to think of as the Great and Terrible StirFry Incident of 2013.

Five months ago, John started letting himself into my apartment to make dinner for me on the nights I worked late. John, to his credit, was an excellent cook, and the whole dinner thing was a nice idea—in theory. In reality, I came home to a mess in the kitchen and the sound of Toby barking frantically from my bedroom.

"Your dog was giving me the hairy eyeball while I cooked," John told me by way of explaining why he'd shut Toby away in the bedroom. He'd just dumped a pot of spaghetti into a colander and steam rose up behind him from the sink.

I'd never liked how John referred to Toby as "your dog," but I was also aware that not everyone loved dogs the way I did and that dating someone who was not exactly like me was probably a healthy route to take. Also, I assumed John's hairy eyeball comment was a joke. I mean, Toby had the standard canine, hair *around*theeyeballs thing going on, but his expression rarely strayed from one of trusting good cheer.

The second time I came home to Toby barking from the bedroom, I understood that John had not been joking. Or at least that I no longer found him funny. John pretended to be baffled by my anger, but I could see something callous and hard lurking behind his innocent expression. His actions were a power play, I realized—an ultimatum. John wanted me to choose his side, to pick him over Toby, to prove that I loved him more than I loved my dog. His lack of selfesteem was sad, and as a mental health professional my heart went out to him, but as his girlfriend it was becoming increasingly clear to me that I was dating an asshole.

Still, I kept my cool. I tried to explain Toby's state of mind to John. "Toby is lonely and confused," I said. Except for the high school girl who stopped by to walk him in the afternoon, he was on his own all day. "He's probably underfoot when you get here because he's hoping for a quick walk . . . or at the very least, a little attention."

It broke my heart to think of the disappointment and maybe even dread that my dog might have felt when the front door opened to reveal John instead of me walking in at the end of the day. Toby was fourteen years old—he didn't deserve that sort of treatment.

I'd had two dogs before Toby—a beautiful, highenergy spaniel named Bella followed by a dignified white shepherd named Star. I'd loved those dogs, really loved them, but Toby was different. I picked him out from the shelter when I was nineteen years old. According to the information sheet attached to his kennel, he was a flatcoated retriever mix, weighed sixtyfour pounds, and was about one year old. I liked the idea of adopting a dog that was beyond the puppy stage, a dog with an unknown span of life under his belt. It seemed only fair; he didn't know what he was getting into with me either. Toby looked solid and strong, his black wavy hair spilling over his paws like bellbottoms, and the clever, playful spark in his chocolatebrown eyes caught mine immediately. When I opened his kennel gate, he ran to me, and a wonderful lightness expanded in my chest. I remember that I laughed out loud, the sound mixing in with the din of barking dogs. The only thing missing from the scene was orchestral music soaring to a grand, heart swelling crescendo. That's how big that moment felt to me, and still feels years later, looking back on the memory: the moment I chose Toby and he chose me.

And so Toby became my constant companion throughout that strange terrain of my twenties when I was trying to get my bearings in the new world of adulthood, no longer living at home, wading through boyfriends and college and graduate school and then my rewarding but draining work as a grief therapist. Toby was there through all of it, a goofy, loving friend who kept my spirits up. Boyfriends had come and gone, but Toby had remained.

I have a theory that you get the right dog, the dog you need, for a particular stage of your life. Bella and Star were the dogs I needed in my childhood—comforting, undemanding, and sweet. Toby was the dog I needed to help me break out of my shell as I became an adult. He provided humor and heart and unwavering friendship, never letting me retreat too far into myself. We understood each other, Toby and I. In many ways, I thought of him as my dog soul mate.

I'd never explained to John exactly what Toby meant to me, but really, did I have to? It was my apartment, my rules, my dog. I told John in no uncertain terms not to lock up Toby again.

So when I returned home a third time to the smell of stirfry in the kitchen and the sound of Toby barking in the bedroom, my frustration boiled over into rage. I raced down the hall, glaring at John as I passed the kitchen.

Toby stopped barking the moment I opened the bedroom door. It may seem strange to describe a dog as charismatic, but that was Toby—high spirited, gregarious, brimming with good humored mischief. How could anyone not love him? He had a wide, handsome head, bright, intelligent eyes unclouded by age, and soft black fur that was lately streaked with gray. Now his lip was caught on his gum, exposing a couple of teeth, giving him a funny, disheveled look that made me laugh despite the fact that a moment earlier I'd been fuming. Toby seemed a bit offended by my laughter, or more likely at having been shut in the bedroom, and shook out his fur with a proud little swagger. I grabbed his leash and headed for the door without a single word to John. No amount of perfectly stirfried, teriyakicoated baby corn was worth this bullshit.

We were a block away from my apartment when my cell phone rang.

“We’re done!” Lourdes said by way of greeting. She and her husband, Leo, had finally finished construction on the rental unit below their house and were about to post the listing on craigslist.

She’d been trying for months to convince me to embrace the idea of starting my own practice, but to do it in San Francisco, where, in her words, “the hippydippy Bay Area animal lovers would flock to pet bereavement counseling like hipsters to handbrewed coffee shops.” She’d never been much of a fan of John’s, and ever since she and Leo had entered the home stretch of renovating their rental unit, her effort to get me to move had reached a fever pitch.

As I listened to my friend launch into one final push to convince me to take the apartment, I glanced down at Toby. His hips seemed a bit stiff, but his gait, if slower, was as happy as ever. When we reached the corner, he looked up over his shoulder at me. *Where to next?* his eyes, alight with enthusiasm, seemed to ask. *Let’s go!* Already, he’d forgotten his confinement in the bedroom and was eager to move on. That’s the wonderful thing about dogs—they’re always looking forward.

What am I doing with John? I asked myself. *Why am I still working at the hospital?* At thirty-two years old, I’d never lived anywhere but Philadelphia. I’d been in the same apartment, blocks from my parents’ house, for ten years. I’d been treading water, embedded in routine, for so long—waiting, but for what, exactly?

On the phone, Lourdes had reached her final and most desperate apartment selling point—the energyefficient toilet. “There are two levels of flush,” she was saying. “One is for pee, and the other—”

“Lourdes,” I interrupted, laughing, “I’ll take it.”

“What? You’re not dying to know about the second level of flush? This kind of information isn’t going to make or break your decision?” She paused. “*Shut the fucking front door.* Did you just say that you’ll take it?”

Lourdes’s excited squeal was so loud that Toby froze, cocked one silky saltandpepper ear toward the sky, and barked.

Four months later, here I am, knocking on Lourdes’s door. If you must come down with a touch of agoraphobia, I highly recommend doing it in an apartment where your best friend from college lives upstairs, safely within the confines of a fence that separates the property from the city sidewalk.

The moment Lourdes opens the door, her poodle, Giselle, races forward and wedges herself between my legs. I steady myself on the doorframe and laugh.

“Well, it’s happened,” Lourdes says, staring at her dog. “The girls have finally convinced her that she’s a pony.”

I kneel down to Giselle’s level and smooth back the funny bouffant of ginger hair between her ears. It springs right back into place. Giselle is gangly and cheerful and smart and I imagine that if she spoke she would sound just like Julia Child, whose television show my mother watched in reruns throughout my childhood. Her tongue shoots out and I turn my head, laughing, so it lands on my cheek.

Lourdes takes in our little exchange, amused. “Wine?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

At the kitchen table, Lourdes’s daughters, Portia and Gabby, are drawing on a long sheet of white butcher paper that is anchored by two plastic bins of crayons and two glass sphere terrariums filled with dirt and succulent plants. The succulents are cuttings from the rows of raised beds that Lourdes herself built in the backyard.

If I love my downstairs apartment for its tidy quiet, I love Lourdes and Leo’s house for its energy, the jazz rhythms of family life. It’s a pale slip of a home that all winter long seemed in danger of having its edges erased by fog and rain. There one moment, gone the next. It looks like a modest Victorian from the front, but they gutted the inside a couple of years ago and now there is an open floor plan with concrete floors and an entire wall of glass that can be folded like an accordion when the weather allows. The glass wall is closed today. In the distance, fog clings to the steep, dark tilt of Sutro Forest, a hint of sunset searing its edges. I feel a twinge of vertigo and look away.

“Hi, girls,” I say, heading toward the table.

“Mags!” Gabby squeals. She’s three and recently had her first haircut; her round, angelic face is newly framed by the jetblack bowl cut favored by serial killers.

“Hi, Maggie!” says Portia, who is seven.

Lourdes opens a bottle of wine and fills two glasses. In the decade since college—despite marriage and children and years of running her own landscape design business—it seems to me that Lourdes hasn’t changed a bit. Her wardrobe is still a study of efficiency—a rotation of buttondown shirts, usually in a bright check print, and dark jeans that now have knees rubbed threadbare from gardening. She still wears her shiny black hair tucked behind her ears and puts on thick black glasses every day because she can’t be bothered with contacts. On someone else, those glasses might seem severe, but Lourdes has one of those faces that can never appear anything but affable. Even when she’s unleashing a torrent of sarcasm, cursing up a blue streak, my friend’s dark eyes never lose their velvety warmth.

She finishes pouring the wine and holds out one of the glasses. “Good day at work?”

I nod, taking a long sip of wine. “I just had the final session with one of the first patients I saw when I moved here.”

“Therapy,” Lourdes responds, shaking her head. She’s flicking through the pages of one of the supermarket coupon books she loves, stopping occasionally to rip something out or circle a deal with a green crayon. “It’s a horrible business model. If you’re good at what you do, you lose clients.”

“Patients,” I correct.

“Is a virtue I don’t have.” She looks up and releases a catlike grin.

“Add it to the list,” I say. “How’s the garden project?”

Lourdes had put her landscape design business on hold after Gabby was born, but she recently became involved with Portia’s elementary school’s efforts to plant a vegetable garden in a corner of the school yard. Accustomed to designing elaborate gardens with only a homeowner as a guide, she’s grown increasingly frustrated by the slow decisionmaking pace of the large committee of parents assigned to the project.

By way of answer, she lofts her eyebrows and takes a gulp of wine. We sometimes communicate in sips of alcohol, a little trick we established in college.

Gabby runs bellyfirst over to me and clammers onto my lap. She’s not, generally speaking, a calm child—I once caught her crouching beside Giselle’s bowl, squirreling dog food in her cheeks with a sheen of manic glee in her eyes—but she seems to enjoy sitting on my lap and staring at my face. Her whole body stills as she studies me. The experience is both comforting and unnerving. She is so full of trust, so fearless. It makes my throat tighten.

“Hello, Gabby,” I say.

“Hi, Mags,” she lisps. And then, with a casual motion that reminds me of the time a guy on a bus in Philadelphia opened his blazer to show me rows of stolen iPhones, Gabby lifts her shirt to reveal that her entire belly is covered with Trader Joe’s stickers. She pulls one off and hands it to me. She doesn’t even wince when she rips that sticker off her skin, that’s what a wonderful little bruiser she is.

“Oh, thank you. I’ve always felt I was missing something riiiiight”—I press the sticker to the tip of my nose—“here.”

Gabby laughs. Lourdes watches as her daughter lowers herself off my lap and begins dancing around the table. There’s classical music playing, something so mild and soothing I’d hardly noticed it before, but Gabby is jerking her shoulders and shaking her hips.

“She dances like her father,” Lourdes says ruefully, causing me to snort into my wine glass. “All right, *chiquitas*. Time for pajamas.” Portia and Gabby groan, but scamper out of sight. We hear their feet stomping up the staircase and then the sound of drawers opening and shutting.

Giselle trots over and sets her head on my lap. She’s an affectionate dog, easy to love. When Toby and I first arrived at Lourdes’s house after three days of crosscountry driving in a cramped rental car, Toby and Giselle had immediately begun racing around the small yard together. Well, “racing” is a bit of a stretch—Toby wasn’t doing much racing by then. But the dogs had bowed to each other and wagged their tails and batted each other with their paws, teeth merrily exposed. I’ve always believed there is something infectious about dogs at play, and, sure enough, Toby and Giselle’s happy energy cast a spell over our arrival. By the time Lourdes led me down the stepping stone path to the bright blue apartment door tucked away at the back of their lovely home, the seeds of doubt that had sprouted in my mind as I’d driven across the country were gone.

I’m still petting Giselle, but I must lose track of where I am for a moment because next thing I know I’m reaching into my pocket and scooping out a handful of my evening vitamins. I toss them into my mouth and wash them down with a gulp of wine.

“What was that?” Lourdes asks.

“What?”

“Nobody told me we’d reached the pillpopping portion of the evening.”

“Sometimes a girl needs a little pickmeup.”

“Maggie.”

My laugh has a tinny ring. “It’s just vitamin C.”

“That’s a lot of vitamin C.”

Upstairs, someone shrieks. I watch Lourdes as she holds her breath, head tilted, debating if she has to go up and intervene. When the sound doesn’t escalate, she sighs audibly and sinks deeper into her seat. We clink our glasses together and I think maybe she’s forgotten about the vitamins but then she says:

“When Leo gets home we should take this party on the road. Head down to Kezar’s for a dirty martini.”

I sip my wine, hoping it will do for an answer. She raises an eyebrow.

“Moment of truth,” she says. “What’s the tally?”

I take a deep breath. “In today’s performance of *The Agoraphobic Therapist*,” I say, “the title role will be played by Maggie Brennan.” Then, to the tune of “Seasons of Love” from the musical

Rent, I begin to sing. “*How do you measure / three months at home? In Netflix – In Amazon / In Google – In cups of coffee . . .*”

Lourdes laughs. “Really, Maggie. How many days?”

“Ninetyeight.”

She’s my best friend, and I’ve told her everything. Well, not everything. I haven’t told her that I’m worried about my practice, that if there isn’t a serious uptick in the number of patients I see, I’ll need to dip into my savings to pay rent. Worse, that I’m afraid I might be a fraud—after all, a therapist who doesn’t have her shit together is like a hair stylist with a bad perm. Or that I seem to be having trouble saying goodbye to my patients, even the ones that I know I’ve helped, and it’s not just that I’m concerned about the loss of income. Some things are too hard to say out loud, even to Lourdes. It would be all too easy for the stickiness of our dual relationship—landlady/renter and best friends—to become like tacky floor between us; I fear that we would eventually keep our distance from each other, not wanting to get stuck.

But she does know that I haven’t left the property in months, and she knows about my family history. She know that I’ve recently graduated from neat freak to germaphobe, that I worry about the illnesses my patients might introduce into my little haven, that I’ve been steadily working my way through a stockpile of vitamins and medicinal teas and antibacterial soap. Really, what choice do I have but to be vigilant? What would I do if I caught something? Even my good friend Google would have trouble locating a doctor willing to make a house call for less than a small fortune. Still, I normally remember to keep my vitamin intake to a minimum around Lourdes; I try to exercise restraint.

“Ninetyeight days,” Lourdes says. Despite her casual tone, I can tell she is troubled. “That’s too long.”

I know that it’s not fair that Lourdes and Leo are the only ones who know that I haven’t left the property in three months. Every once in a while she threatens to call my parents and fill them in, but she won’t follow through. She feels responsible—she thinks she’s the one who convinced me to move across the country, to leave my job and my old life behind. She worries that the stress of so many changes at once hit me hard, and she’s not wrong. Her guilt works to my advantage. I hate that she feels accountable, but my parents can’t know what is going on. The news would crush my father—my mother, maybe worse.

I lift the wine bottle and pretend to read the description on the label. “Have you ever noticed that they never describe wine as tasting like grapes? Leather . . . nutmeg . . . but grapes? Never.” I turn the bottle in my hand and address it sternly. “What, you’re too good for the fruit that made you?”

Lourdes holds up her hands. “Fine, fine, I get it. We can change the subject right after you tell me you’ll try to go outside. I’ll go with you. Let me help you. Please, Maggie.”

Even though we joke easily about it, I don’t want Lourdes to see me in the grip of a panic attack. It’s too embarrassing. As a mental health professional, I know mental illness is nothing to be ashamed of; as a woman, I have my pride.

Ninetyeight days ago, just a week before opening my practice, I sat in a veterinarian’s office and watched my beloved Toby die. Afterward, I walked home through Golden Gate Park, heartbroken. It was dusk, the park a web of unfamiliar, darkening paths. The panic didn’t descend gradually. I felt the very moment it took hold of me, plunging me into an icy black sea that I’d heard patients describe, but into which I myself had never dipped more than a toe. My heart felt grotesquely swollen, shuddering and pounding in the space of my suddenly tootight chest. Inky holes, opaque as oil slicks, traveled across my vision. I gasped for breath, and when I swallowed, my saliva tasted sour, toxic. All around me, the trees moved, bending toward me, shadows closing in on me, and then I was running, stumbling, terrified, desperate to be safely home. I felt as though I were running for my life.

It was only much later, after hours of sobbing in my horribly empty, Tobyless apartment, that my breathing slowly returned to normal and I was able to put on my Mental Health Professional cap. I knew that what I’d experienced in the park was not a heart attack, but a panic attack; despite how it had felt, my life—even my sanity—had never been in true danger. And then, the next day, when I finally tried to push open the sidewalk gate and walk to the market for coffee, I realized how little my years of education and training and counseling helped. Being armed with knowledge was like bringing a knife to a gunfight. Immediately, my heart began to

pound. My throat tightened and then I was shaking, crumpling in half, gasping for air. My fear morphed into an enormous, hungry beast that gripped my chest in its claws, stealing my oxygen, blocking the sun.

And so even though I know better—even though everything I have ever studied has stated otherwise—I'm convinced the panic is not something that can be controlled, only avoided. This is what I had never fully comprehended when I heard my patients describe the panic they felt, what I am not sure is possible to understand unless you experience it firsthand: the panic is so terrifying that the decision to change your entire life so that you might avoid feeling it again seems reasonable, even rational.

But I can't go on like this. I know I can't. I can't let my life crumble because I'm unable to follow the very advice I've doled out to my patients for years. And chatting comfortably with my best friend here in her home, it's easy to pretend I'm the same person I've always been; someone with a few quirks, perhaps—a bit of an allergy to change, a slight fear of heights, something of a neat freak—but nothing that can't be controlled with a good tug on my own bootstraps. It's easy to sit here and analyze and dissect the enormous panic I have recently felt and, in so doing, contain it. After all, I know it's just a big physiological misunderstanding; my anxiety makes my heart race, which makes my brain think I'm in physical danger, under attack, and it kicks my body into fight-or-flight mode, pumping out adrenaline, making my pulse soar, my hands shake, my vision narrow. It's a chain reaction of misguided and misinterpreted signals. Nerve cells. Chemicals. From a distance, it all fits into a neat equation. And for the moment, rational thought and the warm buzz of wine and friendship and the sweet sound of Giselle's sleepy breathing below the table all join forces to quiet the hulking beast that is my fear.

"Okay," I promise Lourdes. "I'll try." I take a sip of wine, my throat excruciatingly dry all of a sudden.

Lourdes beams, clearly relieved.

I'm eager to change the subject—I've always felt more comfortable listening to others' problems than discussing my own—so I ask Lourdes again about the vegetable garden project at Portia's school. Now that the wine has loosened her up a bit, I know she won't be able to resist airing her grievances.

"Oh, Maggie, these parents." She groans. "They can't seem to wrap their minds around the fact that the vegetables will *grow*. They want to pack the veggies in an inch apart, and mix them all up without any plan. They think it will provide teachable moments about *diversity*. Those plants are going to choke the life out of each other. It will be gruesome. Little kids watering dying plants day after day. It will be a teachable moment, all right. A teachable moment about death. A teachable moment about assholes."

“Mama.”

We both jump in our seats. Gabby is standing nearby in her pajamas, a naked baby doll dangling from one of her hands. She'd somehow come back downstairs without us hearing her.

“Did you brush your teeth, pumpkin?” Lourdes asks. Gabby shakes her head. “Go back upstairs and ask your sister to help you. I'll be up for books in a minute.” As Gabby pads silently away, Lourdes turns to me and whispers, “How is there not a horror movie about toddlers in footed pajamas? They're so fucking stealthy!”

I must be drunk by the time I leave Lourdes's because I find myself standing at the bottom of her front steps, swaying slightly as I stare at the line of fence in front of me. The pretty, arched gate at its center is one of the quaint touches that had so charmed me when I first pulled up in front of the house. In a flash of memory, I see Toby lumbering out of the rental car and trotting toward it. In that intuitive way of dogs, he'd somehow known exactly where we were going and decided to lead the way.

I turn away from the gate and instantly feel better. Just looking in the direction of my apartment makes something dark and heavy evaporate from my chest, freeing space for air. I practically float down the path to my apartment, my feet barely connecting with the stones that hug the side of Lourdes's house and mark my way home. By the time I feel the cool metal of the doorknob turn in my hand, I'm smiling. When I shut the door behind me, the breath I exhale sounds like a laugh. It's a sort of mild euphoria, returning home, a delicious loosening in all of my joints. I sink into the couch, feeling dull and mellow until I remember the promise I made to Lourdes.

I'll try, I'd said.

As if it were simple.