Because he knew he wasn't going to be there for her teenage years, Grace's dad built a German Shepherd to be there in his stead. What Grace's friend Tawny asked Grace was, "If your dad could, like, build anything, then why didn't he build little-bitty robots that ate cancer?"

Grace and Tawny had been friends since second grade, so there was no need for Tawny to tack a "no offense" anywhere in there.

Grace just shrugged.

They were supposed to be making pie batter together, to eat with saltines like they liked to do when Grace's mom would let them get away with it, but Grace wasn't helping stir. She was looking out the big window in the breakfast nook, at the January snow coming down.

Benjo Kane padded up by her right leg, looked out through the window with her, to make sure everything was all right.

Faintly, and in what Grace had to admit was a comforting way, the actuators or whatever behind his eyes whirred, allowing Benjo to survey for threats, not just immediately by the window and across the street at the Jamesons', but in a whole stack of spectrums too.

Because Benjo had also been designed to not freak people out, her dad programmed him to pant and dog-smile while he did this.

Grace scrunched her fingers through the thick hair at the top of his head. He didn't push up into her fingertips to luxuriate in the petting like Grace was pretty sure she remembered from other dogs. His neck-cylinders had locked in place to steady his eyes. He was equipped with image-stabilization, of course, but her dad's rule was to always trust hardware first, software last.

"Benjo, warmer," Grace said, not nearly loud enough for Tawny to hear.

She wasn't actually cold, but looking at the snow made her want a fire. Benjo couldn't go all flame-on, but he was a pretty serviceable space heater. That was the main way she used him in winter. Her mom said it was a waste, just using him like that, sending him to bed ten minutes before herself, but what Grace used to say back was that Dad

had built Benjo for her, right?

What Grace's mom didn't know was that Benjo was a calculator, too. He couldn't speak, and his paws weren't small enough to manipulate a keyboard, but when Grace hit a branching point in an equation, she could always hold it up for Benjo to see, then tell him left paw, I go this way now for a page or two. Right paw, that way.

Her calculus grade was tracing its own sine curve, higher and higher.

Just like it would if Dad were here to help me with it, Grace told herself.

What her dad never could have managed, though, it was—

"Watch this," Grace whispered back to Tawny.

Tawny crowded up against the window with them.

"Is that Lawson's brother?" she said.

"He's back from college," Grace said.

"Keller, right?" Tawny whispered. Then, with a thrill to her voice: "College. . . "

"Shh," Grace said.

A growl was building in Benjo's chest.

It felt like a giant screw boring through rock but doing it slowly, gingerly, so as not to shatter anything.

At the end of Keller's long leash was his mom's small white and black terrier.

Grace smiled.

Across the street, the Jameson's front door opened and Mr. Jameson stepped out in his robe, lifted his hand in greeting to Keller, the returning hero of the block, back with a degree it had only taken him one extra semester to earn.

Keller looked over, switched hands on the leash so as to wave back, and that gave the black and white terrier enough slack to dart onto Grace's lawn, its nose burrowing through the snow, its bobbed tail stiff and fast.

Intruder alert, intruder alert.

Benjo’s growl ramped up into his mouth, came out as a single, harsh bark loud enough that Grace’s reflection trembled and wavered.

The glass was new, as Benjo had had to learn about modulating his voice.

What he’d also learned—he was adaptive, Grace’s dad had told her from his hospital bed, he’ll learn, and keep on learning—was dog language.

Grace wasn’t sure what exactly he told that white and black terrier with that single sharp bark, but whatever it was, it made the terrier ball up and fall back, as if it were being swooped down on by a hawk.

Keller looked up, to Grace.

“Sorry,” she lip-said, lifting her hand to show that her dog might be like this, but she wasn’t.

Tawny had been right, about the way she’d said “Keller.”

Keller nodded back, not quite smiling but not-not smiling, either, and stepped onto their lawn to retrieve his mom’s terrier.

“No,” Grace said to Benjo.

His nose was right against the glass now.

The smear it left there would smell like petroleum. It was one thing her dad hadn’t been able to simulate: dog saliva.

If he’d had time, maybe.

Scooping the terrier up, Keller looked up to the window again, as if seeing Grace for the first time. Grace stood taller. She was no longer the eighth-grader she’d been back when Keller was lifeguarding.

It was good he couldn’t hear Benjo’s growl, or feel it resonating up through his canine chassis.

All that was left a moment later was a dab of yellow on the snow, where the terrier had cowered.

Benjo’s tail swept back and forth twice, in satisfaction.

After the Valentine’s Day dinner—the date, Grace loud-whispered to Tawny over the

phone—Keller brought Grace back to the front door. At which point Grace's mom invited him in, since it was cold enough to see your breath.

Keller's new job didn't start until April. It was three hundred miles away. He was going to be a software engineer. At least until he blasted off into the stratosphere with some new startup. The desk job, he explained to Grace over their long walks around the park, the black-and-white terrier keeping the leash stretched tight, the desk job was just his disguise, see. His desk job was the big square eyeglasses he was going to put on every morning to fit in with the rest of the worker bees. At night, though, tinkering with code in his downtown apartment, he'd be flying over the city.

Grace's mom had reminded her that high school seniors and junior professionals didn't always. . . they didn't always make it to their first anniversary.

"You think he's a summer boy," Grace had said back about this.

"A what?" her mom asked.

"Temporary."

"No," her mom said. "I just—I just don't want you to be."

"It's still winter," Grace ended with, even though it wasn't exactly the kind of closing line to make a big swooshing exit with. She did anyway.

It was all different the way she relayed it to Tawny on their nightly call.

And so it had begun, whatever it was that was happening. Walks around the park with Keller's mom's terrier. Grace telling Keller about school, about her plans, about Benjo, and, finally, her dad.

"He's the one who taught me syntax," Keller said.

Grace looked up to him about this, the question on her face.

Her dad had taught her proper syntax as well—you couldn't code without knowing the basics—but she'd never realized that the reason he could package it all up for her so well was that she was round two.

"When?" she said.

Keller looked up and to the right, kind of squinting in that way that Tawny said made him look like he might be thinking big thoughts.

“I was thirteen, I think,” he said. “Yeah. That was the year we had the black gaming computer with the green lights. He did something to the BIOS. It made it where the lights would warn me if there was someone behind me. Just in certain games, I mean. I still haven't figured that patch out.”

I would have been eight, Grace didn’t say.

They were holding hands by then, when it worked out. When the terrier—Muggy—wasn’t too worked up by smells or sounds or squirrels or other dogs.

Twice during those walks, of which there were probably fifteen, Grace had done the lookaway thing Tawny insisted was her best, most fetching gesture. It was supposed to make her look disinterested, on the road to bored, even. Seeing that, any boy would of course leap to impress, right?

It was more basic math than calculus, but it had, once so far, prompted Keller to ask what Grace was thinking.

She wasn’t on the road to boredom.

In her head, she was skipping.

Two of those lookaways, though, she’d seen, moving like a ghost through the trees of the park, pacing them, a set of shadowy legs. Dog legs. Big dog legs.

Upon returning home for some made-up chore or homework, Benjo would already be there waiting for her, of course.

The fur of his legs and belly would be dry, not wet with melting snow, but was that a hidden feature, maybe? If he could serve as a space heater, surely he could dial that up, dry almost instantly, right?

The hairs of his fur weren’t textured the same as regular hair, either. It was smoother, more perfect. Grace’s dad had joked about patenting it, calling it “Duckback” or something, for the way it shed water.

But then he’d had more pressing concerns. Like dying.

“So this is him,” Keller said, just inside the door after Valentine’s Day dinner.

He offered the back of his hand for Benjo to sniff.

Benjo did but it was just an act, Grace knew. He’d already taken Keller’s scent from her clothes, she knew. He’d already processed that scent through enough filters and

databanks that he knew not just what Keller'd had for breakfast, but what he usually had for breakfast.

"Good boy," Keller said, and pinched his slacks to squat down to Benjo's level. "His eyes are good," he said up to Grace. "Realistic."

"He's been worried about you all night," Grace's mom said to her. She was balancing in a tray with two matched coffee cups on it, the whipped cream swirled high on the hot chocolate Grace could already smell. "Was Giorgio's crowded?" she asked.

"I had those noodles," Grace said, swirling around to fall back into the loveseat in that way that said this was her house.

"Lot of couples there," Keller said, standing to take the cup Grace's mom was offering.

"And their violin players," Grace added, and mimed screeching a bow across her shoulder.

"I love the violin," her mom said, her voice going all wispy and dreamy and romantic.

Keller sat down beside Grace, balancing the saucer and cup on his knee, and Grace's mom guided Grace's cup down to her.

"Thanks, Mom," Grace said flatly. It meant goodbye, without the please.

For once, Grace's mom took the cue, made her exit.

Because the hot chocolate was too hot to drink—Grace had no idea how her mom had known when to have it heated, but that was her mom—they each just held their cups and fiddled their fingers. Keller couldn't stop staring at Benjo.

"Why Kane?" he said.

"Because he assists," Grace recited. "Because he's good for walks."

It was the worst joke. Her dad had loved it.

"Does he shed?" Keller asked.

"Let's not talk about the dog," Grace said, settling her cup onto the coffee table.

Benjo laid down at her feet. At both their feet.

He didn't need to rest—ever—but he could take cues too.

When Keller tried to slurp his hot chocolate in with enough air to keep from burning himself, the whipped cream dotted his nose, and it was funny enough that Grace dabbed her finger against it, dotted her own nose.

“No, I shouldn’t, it’s yours,” she said, and leaned forward to touch her nose to his, give that whipped cream back.

It was a moment that slowed down.

Keller’s hand found. . . kind of her upper neck, kind of her jaw.

Her skin had never been so alive.

She breathed out through her mouth, and then Keller’s lips were brushing hers, his breath mingling with hers, and she closed her eyes for this because it was going to be just like Tawny promised it was going to be.

Except now Keller was jerking back hard enough to slosh a dollop of hot chocolate out onto his tan slacks.

It was Benjo.

He was sitting up between their knees, his back showdog straight, his ears radared forward to the two of them, his eyes black and glassy.

He was growling.

Grace could feel it in the wooden frame of the couch.

“Um, well,” Keller said, managing his saucer and cup down to the coffee table, alongside Grace’s. “I better—” and he gestured to the spill on his slacks that he needed to attend to. Home. At his house, five doors down. A world away.

At the door Grace stepped around in front of him, her arms already around his neck, and Keller looked into her eyes for what she was going to tell Tawny was a single forever, but then Benjo was there looking up at the two of them, and Keller was guiding Grace to the side by the hips.

That night, for the first time ever, the first time since her dad died, Grace made Benjo sleep in the hall.

Usually she could see a line of yellow at the bottom of her door, from the night light her mom kept on to, as she put it, “guide weary travelers.”

Now Benjo was blotting that light out.

The next time Keller brought an electric blanket that he plugged into the outlet by the swing on the porch, and Grace locked Benjo in the house. It should have worked, but evidently Benjo had a transponder built into him somewhere.

The garage door opened and he padded around, sat there facing them.

“Is he waterproof?” Keller asked mischievously, but also kind of seriously.

“He’s everything-proof,” Grace deadpanned back.

“Well,” Keller said.

Three days later he showed up with his laptop and some homemade apparatus hanging from a port.

“When all else fails, open a terminal window,” he said, and sat down on the loveseat again, tapped into their wifi without Grace telling him the password—“Home networks are cake,” he assured, which actually wasn’t assuring at all—and then ran a script he said it had taken thirty-six hours to get right.

“What’s it do?” Grace asked, sitting down beside him to watch.

“I figure if he can open garage doors,” Keller said, dramatically missile-guiding his index finger down to the Enter key, “he can probably receive, too. It’s just about finding the right frequency, and then piggybacking. He’s got to update from time to time, right? Y’all have a unit in a closet somewhere that runs diagnostics on him?”

Grace didn’t say anything because she was watching the code compile. Keller had his system rigged with some visual simulator where you could watch the magic happen. “It’s good for catching bugs as they happen,” he said, and then lowered his screen so they could both get eyes on Benjo.

He was sitting there in the doorway to the kitchen like he always did when on guard.

His nose didn’t tic like a regular dog, but he wasn’t a regular dog. He wasn’t panting, but, when no one had been looking at him, he would sometimes conserve energy like that. It wasn’t quite a sleep mode. More like a nap mode, what Grace called his forget-I’m-here mode. But he would still be on full alert.

Except. . . he hadn’t started panting, with both of them giving him all of their attention.

“Gotcha,” Keller said, and settled the laptop onto the coffee table and his hand onto Grace’s knee. “I think we can make him do tricks now, like a regular dog.”

“Tricks?” Grace said.

Keller tapped his voice-command key on, said into his keyboard, “Lie down.”

Benjo did, walking his front feet forward in small steps until he was on his belly like the Sphinx.

“Very regal,” Keller said, rolling his hand out to Benjo, to show off his work.

In the kitchen, a dish shattered.

“Mom?” Grace called, leaning forward to try to see through the doorway. The angle was wrong.

“Yes?” her mom said back with the kind of hesitancy and regret that pretty much announced she’d been caught. That Benjo hadn’t been the only one standing guard over the two lovebirds.

Grace leaned back into the couch in a display of utter despair.

“You say college is better?” she said to Keller, then, before he could answer, she did: “It’s got to be.”

“Should I. . . ?” Keller said, reaching ahead for his laptop. To leave again, Grace was pretty sure.

“I’m eighteen,” Grace said back to him, and pushed up from the couch, disgusted, and held a finger up for him to wait, that she would handle this herself.

Stepping over Benjo was—it was odd.

For the last two years, his every sense had been trained on her every movement. If she stepped over him, he adjusted to minimize the chance of her catching a foot on his back, or slipping on his tail.

He could no longer stand, though.

Or do anything.

“Good boy,” Grace said, kind of feeling sorry for him and not sorry for him at the same

time. Holding both sides of the doorway, she leaned in to give her mom the eye.

Her mom was lying down on the floor by the sink, the side of her head pressed to the tile, her face turned to Grace.

“I’m sorry, dear,” she said, her voice exactly pleasant.

Grace felt the air in her chest shift. Like it was coming in deeper now. Like it was cold.

The cup that had broke was in slimy wet shards all around her mom. It had had hot chocolate in it. The matching cup was still on the counter.

Under her, Benjo’s tail twitched, the way it did when he was rebooting. When he was trying to, anyway.

“Make—make him stand,” Grace said back to Keller.

“You want me to—?”

“Now!” Grace said.

“I’m not sure which does what yet,” Keller said, but tried. He said “Stand!” down into his keyboard.

Nothing.

“Well?” Grace said.

“Wait,” Keller said, and reached forward to tap a key combo.

Benjo didn’t stand.

Grace’s mom, though, from the floor, still looking across at Grace, she barked once, a neat little bark.

After it, her lips pursed in shame, and her eyes got a new sheen.

She could cry, Grace knew. There had been all the months after the funeral. There had been the first day of senior year.

“Mom,” Grace said, slumping over into one side of the doorway. “What—what happened to you?”

Her mom who wasn’t her mom shut her eyes tight, like she didn’t want to see, didn’t

want to remember, didn't want to have to say.

But she did anyway.

"Whoa, whoa, what?" Keller said from the couch.

Grace had forgotten all about him. He was holding his hands up from his laptop, was trying to get as far from it as he could, it looked like.

"What is it?" Grace said, sitting down beside him again.

"I. . . I don't—feedback—it must be some—" Keller sputtered.

Grace tilted her head. Not like a dog trying to understand something, but because the frame was tilted.

This angle, this memory, it was. . . looking down through boards? No: rafters. Looking down onto the main table of her dad's shop.

Just staring. Until Benjo pads in, looks up.

This memory lowers, unfolds itself from the rafters to the table, then the table to the floor, and follows Benjo into the house, down the long hall to the master bedroom, then the master bathroom.

Grace's real, human mom is sitting between the toilet and the bathtub. There's dried vomit coating her chin and the front of her robe. The robe that had been her husband's. There's chalky pills in the vomit. A fly is on her face.

"Mom," Grace said, and touched the new itch on her own cheek.

The memory steps in, closer, past Benjo, and looks up to the smear of motion to the left.

It's the mirror above the sink.

The reflection is Grace's mom, the one from the rafters. The one her dad must have built as well, as backup. There's a fine layer of dust on one side of her face, and a wisp of cobwebs veiled back over her hair, that's the same style Grace's mom used to wear.

But hair's easy.

Grace shut the laptop, angled her face up, closed her eyes.

That’s how she’d been warming the hot chocolate up, always right on time: heater hands, go.

“What does this—?” Keller started, but Grace clamped her hand on his leg for him to shut up.

He had been going to ask: “What does this mean?”

Everything.

Nothing.

Breathe.

If you really even need to.

Grace laughed without opening her mouth, then came back to herself—made herself come back to herself.

She was all she had left, right?

She opened her eyes, turned to Keller, said, “I think we’re alone now.”

One side of his lips smiled. The other wasn’t so sure.

“It’s okay,” Grace said, and used her hand to guide him to her, and they leaned back into the cushions locked together like that at last, exploring, feeling, shuddering with this newness, hungry with it.

“Are you crying?” Keller said when he came up for air, hesitation in his voice.

Grace dabbed a finger to her cheek as if surprised, then she started to smell that wetness, for petroleum, but she couldn’t.

No: she wouldn’t.

She leaned in for Keller again, her dog lying down a few feet away like a good dog, her mom rebooting on the kitchen floor, her dad standing invisible among them all, a control tablet in both hands, glowing up onto his face, and she knew that when she called Tawny later to tell her all about this—“every single wonderful detail!”—that she was probably going to leave one or two out.