



SIX

FEET

BELOW

ZERO

Ena Jones

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For Marie, who is remembered



Baker and I peeked between the curtains and watched our grandmother's bright red sports car speed to the end of the driveway and turn left onto the road. When it disappeared behind the trees, we raced down the basement stairs and crawled underneath the table we'd walled off with jumbo cases of toilet paper: Disaster Headquarters.

Grim Hesper had said she'd be back after her celebration, so we needed to get to work. Baker squeezed beside me as I flipped my laptop open, clicked Compose, and filled in the subject line.

I took a deep breath and began to type.

Dear Aunt Tilly,

We know you're working on your new project, and we're sorry for the kabillion phone messages and texts and emails, but the most terrible thing happened, and we need you home NOW.

Twelve days ago Great-Grammy keeled over—and died!

It started back in March, when she fainted in the yard.

Baker leaned into my shoulder. "Rosie, what are you doing, writing a book? Just hit Send already."

“I will,” I said, nudging him off me.

“We have to search Grim Hesper’s room for the lockbox! *Please*, don’t make me go in there alone.”

At this point I’d usually call him a baby, but I was trying not to do that anymore.

“Don’t you get it?” I said instead. “We have to stay at the top of Aunt Tilly’s inboxes so when she checks her messages she’ll see ours first. I bet the email you sent yesterday is buried under a hundred more from people all over the world.”

Baker rose onto his hands with a huff. “*You’re* the one who told me to keep it simple. You said put EMERGENCY in the subject line, and then tell her Great-Grammy’s sick and she needs to come home. ‘*That’s it,*’ you said. And what about never *ever* saying Great-Grammy’s dead in actual writing? We’re going to end up in jail. Again!”

“We were never in jail, Baker.”

“I was six feet from a jail cell, Rosie, and there were handcuffed people everywhere. For eleven years old, that qualifies.” Baker stabbed his finger at the screen. “At least take ‘Great-Grammy’s Dead!’ out of the subject line.”

I cranked my head and met his eyes. “She *is* DEAD!”

I didn’t mean to shout. I’d been working very hard at *not* shouting, or calling names, or being difficult. The things that probably made Great-Grammy miserable—and disappointed—when she was alive.

I counted to five and started again in a lower voice. “Sick is not the same as dead. *Dead* gets a person’s attention. That’s what we’re trying to do: get Aunt Tilly’s attention!”

Baker rolled on his side to face me. “You know what happens when she goes underground to research her books.”

“She promised Great-Grammy she would check her messages this time.”

Baker shook his head. “Aunt Tilly doesn’t visit places with phones and Internet. Remember when she went camping in Iceland? In *winter*? She disappeared for three months. Great-Grammy was worried sick.”

“How else was she supposed to get those pictures of the northern lights?”

Baker might have been the brainy one in our family, but I was older, and I had a good reason for being bossy. Even if Aunt Tilly was living in some sort of laboratory base station at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, this email was our last chance.

We needed our aunt’s help. Horrible Hesper was *her* mother, after all.

I hunched over the keyboard and kept writing.

Aunt Tilly, it’s time to tell the truth. We’ve done something worse than bad, but we have a very good reason. See, Great-Grammy told us to do it. And she put it in writing! It was practically her last will and testament, and isn’t it pretty much a commandment that you have to do what dead people want you to do? Especially with their bodies?

Baker mashed his face into the blanket underneath us and groaned. Then he got to his knees and heaved a frustrated sigh. “You’re really

going to tell her all of it? That Grim Hesper's living here and she's selling this place, and it's about three inches away from being bulldozed? And about the money, and the will, and the reason those things are important: because Great-Grammy's—?"

I propped up on my elbows and glared straight into his eyeballs. "Yes. Because she's D-E-A-D, Baker. *Dead.*"

Baker cringed, then slowly backed out of our "office." For a second I felt guilty. Maybe I should have been helping Baker. But our aunt had to come home. Even *she* would be shocked by how despicable *dear* Grim Hesper had become.

I turned back to the keyboard. Letter by letter, I typed the impossible-to-believe words:

Aunt Tilly, I better get to the point:

We put Great-Grammy in the basement freezer, and we're pretending she's alive until you come home.

But like I said, we have a very good reason.



Remember how I said the whole thing started in March?

It was a normal Saturday morning—the first official weekend of spring—sunny and cool, but warming fast. We’d just devoured an entire plate of Baker’s sticky buns and the three of us were stuffed.

According to Great-Grammy—who might have been older than dirt, as she often joked, but was stronger than most men half her age—that meant we were ready for a day of yard work.

Great-Grammy and I dragged rakes and tarps from the garage to the middle of the front yard, next to her favorite seahorse birdbath. The winter had been long, with a ton of heavy, wet snow, and we had ten acres of mess to clean up. As usual, I was griping about it.

I spread a tarp on the ground and straightened the corners. “Where’s Baker?”

“Oh, he disappeared thataway,” said Great-Grammy, picking up a stick and waving it eastward. She brought the stick to the birdbath and began scraping the layers of slimy leaves, flicking pieces of muck into the air. “With the weather getting better, the birds will be looking for a place to shake off winter.” She let the stick drop to the ground and squinted back at the house. “I need the hose to do this properly.”

Next thing I knew she was galloping across the yard, over groundhog humps and holes, and zigzagging around the wackadoo yard art you could probably see from outer space. When she got to the spigot by the front porch, she slung the first ten feet of hose over her shoulder and started the same maniac dance back to the birdbath, only this time she was dragging the longest garden hose in the history of online shopping.

I snuck a glimpse at the McMansions that straddled our property and cringed, imagining the neighbors watching through binoculars. At least the family graveyard was hidden back in the woods where nobody could see. No way I wanted people knowing about *that*. “Great-Grammy, *please*, walk like a normal person.”

She harrumphed and kept going. “What is this ‘normal’ of which you speak, Rose Marigold?”

I swallowed my explanation that whatever normal was, her hole dance, her yard sculptures—including the eight-foot-tall alligator rock band and Home Sweet Home ornament shaped like a house that welcomed everybody to our long driveway—and almost everything about her, were the exact opposite. Especially here in suburban Maryland, on ten acres of land just 9.3 miles from the White House.

Home Sweet Home. *Please*.

The only sweet thing about our house was Baker’s cookies.

I looked back at the closest McMansion. Karleen King, a neighbor who was a grade below me, had the perfect view of our past-its-peak house and most of our property, no binoculars necessary. The Kings moved in a year ago, and Karleen had been working overtime trying to be best friends.

At first I was polite, since Great-Grammy insisted I needed a friend. Karleen had a *the sun is shining every day* personality—maybe she'd tolerate my supposed moods.

Karleen's mom was a different story. Mrs. King was a well-known news anchor for a local television station in Washington, DC. Every time I saw her, my hair seemed to be full of brambles, my legs scratched and bug-bitten all the way to my bare feet, and my clothes shredded from jumping fences and climbing trees.

It was easy to imagine what Mrs. King thought of us. We were her "country" neighbors. Now, whenever she—or perfectly dressed Karleen—showed up, I hightailed it over the back fence and took a long walk through the woods. Great-Grammy was wrong. I *didn't* need a friend.

Great-Grammy caught me staring at the Kings' house and wagged her muddy finger. "I like his wife—she worries about her daughter the same way I worry about you—but that Ted King is just waiting for me to trip across one of these holes. Probably has six cameras pointed so he knows the very second I keel over. And you know who he'll call first?"

She'd told Baker and me a million times already. The worst relative in the history of relatives. The one who tried to send us away to separate boarding schools when Mom and Dad died in a car accident three years ago: Great-Grammy's daughter, Gram Hesper. Or *Grim* Hesper, as Baker and I secretly called her.

Great-Grammy reached the birdbath and yanked the hose hard. "Yes, sir," she said with a sorry laugh. "That daughter of mine would sell King Construction the whole kit and caboodle if she ever had

the chance. They're hungry to cram a dozen mini-mansions on our piece of heaven." She clucked her tongue and squeezed her eyes shut, raising her fingers to her temples for a good rub. Opening her eyes again, she stretched her arms wide, the hose swinging. "All our land bulldozed. Can you imagine, Rosie? Our deer, rabbits, birds, even the groundhog... homeless, or worse."

I picked up my rake and began attacking the dead grass and leaves. I wasn't going to say so, but I *could* imagine it. I'd always wanted to live in a fancy new house—like Karleen's—and it made me feel like a traitor.

Ours was more than 130 years old, and the modern homes around us made it look even older and more rickety. Great-Grammy didn't see it that way, maybe because her great-great-great-great-somebody built it. "Stick by stick and brick by brick" was what she liked to say.

Great-Grammy pursed her lips, as if she'd read my mind. "One of these days, Rosie, you'll treasure what we have here the way I do."

I bent to pick up a large rock. As I tossed it on the tarp, I met her eyes. "I'd *treasure* a real shower instead of the bathtub contraption you rigged."

Great-Grammy snorted and pulled a bristle brush from somewhere in her jacket. "I'll have you know, Baker and I watched over thirty videos to come up with that design. I'm sorry you don't appreciate it." She began to scrub the birdbath, and her eyes lit with a strange mix of satisfaction and mischief. "Your grandmother Hesper doesn't like it, either," she said, chuckling.

I tried not to agree with Grim Hesper about anything, but this time she was 100 percent correct. I didn't blame my grandmother for hating the old house, or for running as far away as possible when she

went to college so many years ago. I could see myself doing the exact same thing.

Unlike me, however, Grim Hesper looked out for one person and one person only. Like when she wanted to go to law school, and Great-Gramps and Great-Grammy said she'd be a good lawyer but would have to find a way to pay for it herself.

So that's what Grim Hesper did. Sort of.

She took out loans and put them in our great-grandparents' names—without telling them. A few years later, after Great-Gramps had died, and just about the time Grim Hesper graduated, found a good job, and got married, Great-Grammy began receiving bills.

Great-Grammy didn't pay them. Instead, she forwarded the bills to Grim Hesper every single month, without a word of explanation. Hesper was hopping mad that Great-Grammy didn't want to pick up the tab for her education. What kind of mother wasn't willing to help her only child attend one of the best law schools in the country? The two of them didn't speak for a long time.

Then my father was born, and Aunt Tilly, too, and Great-Grammy decided the argument wasn't worth it. She got herself on an airplane and made up with Grim Hesper. She'd always wanted to be a grandmother, and she wasn't going to let a disagreement about money get in the way.

Everything was fine for a few years, until Grim Hesper's husband announced that he was moving to Australia. He hated the fancy house and cars, and he definitely didn't want to be forced to attend the business dinners Hesper dragged him to. He was more suited to living barefoot and carefree by the ocean. And that was that.

Grim Hesper drove three thousand miles from California to Maryland with Dad and Aunt Tilly, changed *all* their last names to her maiden name, Spreen, and began interviewing nannies. Great-Grammy thought Grim Hesper's heart was broken but never saw her shed one tear. Instead Grim Hesper found a new job and got to work.

And boy, did she. According to my dad, Grim Hesper worked constantly while they were growing up. The only sorts of things he remembered her saying to him and Aunt Tilly were "Good riddance to your father!" and "I work hard to give us the life we deserve, the best schools, and the nicest things for you two." Dad and Aunt Tilly never saw their dad again, even though they looked for him when they got older. So Baker and I never met our grandfather. It was as if he didn't just move to the other side of the world—he fell off the planet.

When Dad and Aunt Tilly were home from boarding school, they stayed with Great-Grammy. Everybody liked it that way. Dad, Aunt Tilly, Great-Grammy, and especially Grim Hesper.

I peered over my shoulder to my bedroom window on the second floor. I probably wouldn't be a lawyer when I grew up, and I wouldn't send my kids away to school or ignore them like Grim Hesper had, but I'd definitely earn lots of money so I could buy a brand-new house where my hair dryer wouldn't turn off because some pain-in-the-neck brother down the hall flipped a switch.

Great-Grammy was hunched over the birdbath, still vigorously scrubbing and going on about Grim Hesper, the way she did sometimes.

"...She never thought we gave her the childhood she deserved. I don't know how it happened, but that girl managed to come out of the

womb in search of two things: diamonds and dollars.” Great-Grammy’s papery pink skin waggled under her chin. “Oh, but I know how to deal with my money-hungry daughter. I promise you, Rosie, I’ll have the last laugh around here.” She clutched the hose nozzle tightly with one hand and gripped the concrete birdbath with the other. I hurried over to help, mostly because I didn’t want to spend Saturday afternoon in the emergency room for stitches or a broken toe.

Together we tilted it, and Great-Grammy smiled, her silver-blue eyes gleaming as she sprayed. “Yes, I came up with the perfect solution, even better than disowning her. Once Hesper finds out, *she’ll* be the one who keels over.”

I held the birdbath, bracing my whole body against it as she forced the muck out. “Great-Grammy, must you talk about keeling over so often?”

“Yes, I must,” she said. “It motivates me.”

I rolled my eyes and silently thanked the genetics gods that I wasn’t as weird as she was.

We kept working, Great-Grammy filling the birdbath with fresh water, and me piling the remnants of winter onto the tarp. Everything boring and normal as usual.

When we heard screams, neither Great-Grammy nor I flinched, since *that* was normal, too. From the sound of it, Baker was in the middle of another standoff with some ferocious critter. Maybe a chipmunk. I dropped the rake, Great-Grammy flung the hose, and we headed his way. If we didn’t, odds were good Baker would be stuck for hours, and I wasn’t letting him get out of his fair share of work that easily.

Picture an impending catastrophe: the world is doomed unless someone calculates the speed of the spinning earth and coordinates that with the location of an approaching asteroid and the firing power of some superduper world-protecting laser weapon. In that situation, Baker would be the one to call. But if we need to relocate a harmless spider or wrestle a black snake out of the basement, Baker vanishes faster than a platter of his legendary peanut butter and raspberry jam squares.

As we crossed the widest part of the yard toward the greenhouse, Baker wailed again. “What’s taaaaking so long?” Then he howled, “Huuurrry!” It sounded desperate, even for Baker.

We sped down the path between the storage shed and the greenhouse where Great-Grammy started seedlings for the garden every year. As we rounded the corner to the field on the east side of the property, we came to a sudden stop. There was my brother, statue-still, holding a tree limb that dangled from the gigantic oak—my favorite climbing tree.

I scanned the area around him. There wasn’t a critter in sight.

“What’s all the commotion?” said Great-Grammy, as confused as I was.

“Why didn’t anybody warn me groundhogs could climb?” Baker’s eyes slid our way. “I can’t let go or he’ll fall on me.”

“I’ll be,” Great-Grammy said as she looked up at the tree and then at Baker. She chuckled and started for him, shaking her head.

I followed Great-Grammy’s gaze from the limb in my brother’s hands up to where the mini fur-monster swayed, its back paws twisted around a healthy tree limb and its front paws holding tight to the broken limb Baker had been trying to pull from the tree.

“Baker, seriously? Only you could get in a tug-of-war with a groundhog.”

One false move and the groundhog would end up on top of him. Which was sort of funny—except, not. If it fell, Baker would die of fright, and then Great-Grammy would be mad at me.

“Poor thing’s chattering his teeth,” said Great-Grammy. “He’s just as scared as you are.”

“This has nothing to do with feelings,” said Baker. “The problem is, if I let go, he’s going to land teeth and claws first”—then he squealed—“on me!”

“You are *such* a baby,” I said.

Great-Grammy put her hands on her hips. “Baker’s only a year younger than you, my dear. You’ll be thirteen this summer, old enough to realize you’re on the same side. You two need each other.”

Baker sobbed, clutching the branch with all his strength.

“I think *he* needs *me*, to be honest,” I said with a shrug.

Carefully, I walked toward Baker. I put my hands beside his on the broken branch, keeping an eye on the groundhog above. “Super slow,” I whispered. “Let go and back up.”

Baker didn’t waste time. He untwined his fingers, released the branch, and eased away.

When he was safely beside Great-Grammy, I locked eyes with the groundhog. “Steady, boy.” I gripped harder and raised my end of the branch over my head so that it was almost level with the limb still connected to the tree.

It took a few seconds for the groundhog to figure out he needed to let go of the dead branch and grab the other one with his front paws.

Once he was on solid footing, I tugged hard on the broken branch and let it fall.

Great-Grammy, Baker, and I stood together and watched the groundhog waddle to the main trunk of the oak and disappear up the tree.

“Baker, perhaps you should thank your sister.”

Red splotches crawled up Baker’s freckled neck. “Thanks,” he muttered as he turned and headed toward the garage.

Great-Grammy raised her eyebrows at me.

“You’re welcome,” I called after him, grateful she wasn’t forcing us to hug like she usually did after we argued.

I started following Baker, but Great-Grammy touched my arm. “Just one second, Rosie.”

I was probably going to get another lecture about how people held heartbreak and grief inside them and it came out in different ways. Yeah, yeah, I got it. Baker cried and I yelled.

Except, Great-Grammy didn’t say anything. When I looked up, her eyes were the shadowy blue gray of a tall summer cloud, lit by sunshine on one side, heavy and aching to rain on the other.

“*What?*” It didn’t come out like I meant it. Or maybe it did.

Her expression wasn’t mad, or sad, but whatever it was annoyed me. “God really had a chuckle when he made Baker a firecracker red and you the mousy brown.” She exhaled as she swiped wisps of her own white hair from her eyes. “That aside, my little hothead, you and Baker are more alike than you think.”

“Ha!” I waved my hand at the oak tree. “Weren’t you here a minute ago? Baker and I couldn’t be more different.”

“He wasn’t always so afraid, Rosie. And you weren’t always so—”

“So . . . so what?” I knew what she wanted to say: I wasn’t always so awful. But she didn’t. She abruptly pulled me close and wrapped her arms around me. “I love you, Rose Marigold Speen.”

Even though I didn’t say I loved her, too, I think we both felt better—for a couple of minutes.

We headed back to the garage to restart our cleanup day, and I thought the drama was over. But just as we passed the greenhouse, the thing that started our whole six-feet-below-zero mess happened.

Right there in the middle of the early-spring lawn, still mixed with bare patches of dirt, Great-Grammy did the unthinkable: she sat down.

And then she keeled over—all the way to the ground.



I didn't think much about Great-Grammy keeling over at the time. She popped right up, made a joke about needing more coffee, and everything went straight back to normal. Turns out, I should have paid more attention.

In the weeks that followed, there were plenty of clues. And I might have noticed them if I were as smart as I thought I was.

The first clue was that Great-Grammy never recruited us to help start the seedlings in the greenhouse—which also meant we didn't spend an entire weekend digging out the garden like we'd done every year since we were big enough to hold spades.

Then, about a week before Great-Grammy died, a clanging noise woke me up in the middle of the night. I went down to the kitchen to see what was going on, and there she sat, having her usual midnight snack: cherry pie filling over vanilla ice cream.

Only, it wasn't midnight. If we'd had a rooster it would have been crowing soon.

Great-Grammy had a spoon in her mouth as she shuffled through a jumble of envelopes and papers around her laptop. There was a metal box splayed open on the counter a few feet away and a stack of manila

file folders beside it. She half stood and reached across the table to scribble something in a notebook.

“Great-Grammy, what are you doing? Why are you still awake?”

“Oh, I’ve been trying to get everything organized. The bills and whatnot,” she mumbled, the spoon flapping as she spoke. “And hoping to hear back from your aunt Tilly.” She took the spoon from her mouth as she sat back in the chair, giving me a queer look over her reading glasses. “You hungry?”

I glanced at the gloppy red-ribboned mess in her bowl. At 4 a.m. even canned cherry pie grossness looked delicious. So I got my own dish and brought it back to bed, not one bit curious about why she’d been up all night “organizing” bills, or waiting to hear from Aunt Tilly.

The next day should have been another clue. It was late Saturday morning, and I’d gone to my volunteer job at the animal shelter. Two or three times a week, I fed and watered the dogs and cats. This time, though, Great-Grammy forgot to pick me up. She wasn’t answering the house phone, and for the hundredth time it peeved me that she refused to join the twenty-first century and buy herself—or us—a cell phone.

The worst part was Karleen King had picked that morning to volunteer at the shelter as a “junior helper.” It was apparently her twelfth birthday, a chance to spread more sunshine in the world than she usually did. When she showed up, Mrs. Barnhouse patted her shoulder and proceeded to stick her with me.

Karleen’s black hair was parted on the side, her tight curls spiraling to her shoulders. She wore white shorts, a white tank top, and white sneakers. If we were going to take selfies all morning, then sure, the

white looked amazing against her brown skin. But she wasn't dressed for kennel work and I told her so.

"Karleen, you should have worn ratty clothes," I said. "We're going to get super dirty."

She smiled back at me, because what else would Karleen King do? "I'll be careful."

And she *was*. After a whole morning following me from kennel to kennel and doing everything I asked her to do, there wasn't a speck on her entire outfit.

It was maddening!

Because Great-Grammy didn't show or answer the phone, guess who smiled her sunshiny, perfect-house smile and offered me a ride home?

Mrs. King raised her right eyebrow as I opened the back door of her SUV and ducked inside.

"Mom, Rosie needs a ride. Is that okay?" said Karleen.

"Of course," said Mrs. King as she faced front again.

Mrs. King was one of the most beautiful people I'd ever seen up close. And the most prepared, because as soon as Karleen hopped into the front seat, Mrs. King handed her hand sanitizer and a lint roller to remove fur from her clothes.

After buckling up, I stared at my bitten-down fingernails, my knees scuffed with who-knows-what from the kennel floors, and my dark blue T-shirt carpeted with dog and cat hair. Karleen was blathering on about how hard math was this year and that she couldn't wait till summer. Before I could ask why she was in my pre-algebra

class instead of regular sixth-grade math, she twisted in her seat and exclaimed, “I have an idea. We should do homework together!”

Then she handed me the lint roller.

By the time I stomped through our front door, I was steaming, and there was only one person to blame. Great-Grammy might have been right about a lot of things, like maybe I needed to scrub up better, but forgetting to pick me up was just plain wrong. I searched every room in the house and found her in the basement with a notebook, making a list of everything—and I mean everything—we owned.

Great-Grammy loved filling her shelves and cabinets with online “bargains.” Normally, she stocked up on essentials to last through the winter. But it was May first, and the last time I’d been down to the basement, it hadn’t looked like we were preparing to survive a pandemic—or a nuclear bomb.

Now it did. Every shelf was filled, stocked with canned fruits and vegetables and bags of rice. Even her two collapsible tables were set up and loaded with supplies. I opened the upright freezer and it was crammed with labeled storage containers: *Noodle Wiggle* and *Meatloaf* and *Lemon Cake*. More food than we could eat in a year.

I shut the freezer and looked to my far left, where Great-Grammy stood in front of a second, brand-new freezer. She lifted the lid and stared inside.

“Great-Grammy, *what* are you doing?” I might not have sounded very nice, but as usual, I didn’t care.

I crossed the cracked concrete floor and looked over her shoulder. Deep as a tomb, the freezer was long and totally empty. From

the determined expression on Great-Grammy's face, I could tell it wouldn't stay that way for long. I was about to ask what she was going to fill it with, when she let the lid drop and moved to the tables in the middle of the room.

I followed her, peering across the basement at the shadowy area on the other side of the stairs, the side that still had dirt floors, where the spooky Door to Nowhere was built into the ancient rock wall. Great-Grammy had done us a favor keeping her doomsday supplies on the less creepy side of the basement.

The first table was stacked with toilet paper, paper towels, and every other imaginable household product; bars of soap and jugs of laundry detergent. Farther down there were batteries, flashlights, and school supplies.

I stepped toward the second table while Great-Grammy continued to pencil in amounts in her notebook. There were two crate-sized boxes of medicine that appeared to cover any physical distress from diarrhea to colds and sore throats, and countless packages of snacks and candy bars. I looked over the supplies at my great-grandmother.

"What's going on, Great-Grammy? Are we expecting a blizzard this summer or something?" I'd mostly forgotten about Karleen and the unfortunate ride home.

Great-Grammy stayed focused on her notebook. "I'll explain everything later, Rosie."

Later would never come. But I didn't know that as I escaped up the stairs, leaving Great-Grammy and her supplies behind. I just thought her weird was getting weirder.

And boy was it! She kept doing strange stuff over the next week,

and I should have been suspicious. Baker was weird, too. He never talked much, but he'd stopped talking altogether. And then he told his best geek-friend, Will, not to come over, that he'd work on their robot by himself.

I thought I was being a good sister when I asked Baker what was wrong, but when he stared back at me without answering, I lost my temper.

"It's an easy question," I said, instantly a bad sister again. "Just answer!"

He didn't, of course.

Then the thing that *should* have bonked me over the head and told me in a BIG FAT IMPOSSIBLE-TO-IGNORE voice happened:

Great-Grammy dragged Baker and me to the store and bought us the super-smartphones we'd been begging for since forever. And one for herself, too.

If that didn't scream "Your world is about to end!" I don't know what would have.