The Sea Captain's House - Part 4
by Beautyinthemoonlight

Summary

Ali Krieger is the managing partner of Knight-Harris Co, their own sports and entertainment agency, and Ashlyn is fighting for her starting spot as the beloved goalkeeper for the Boston Breakers. 2019 will see them welcome their first child and struggle to take care of both the baby and their relationship. Will Ali be able to balance her high-powered new job with maternity leave and breastfeeding? Can Ashlyn keep her edge on the pitch and focus on her other career responsibilities when so much of her heart is with her little family in the big old house? The new moms learn about the Sea Captain himself, some hidden truths about family members, some hard lessons about friendship, and that the threat of addiction is never gone from their lives. Through it all, they remain true to each other, relying on their love to guide them on their journey.

Notes

Part 4 covers 2019 and 2020, picking up right where Part 3 left off with our happy couple waiting for baby Krieger's debut. There is a lot of pregnancy stuff and delivery stuff and baby stuff because that's where they are in their life together. But don't worry, I won't spend as much time on it during the next pregnancy...that's right, I said it. Baby Krieger #2 becomes a thing in Part 4. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Heartfelt thanks, as always, for reading my little story and being so good to me. Hope this one doesn't let you down.

There's a Tumblr Blog dedicated to this story if you want to check it out. Watch out for spoilers though if you're just starting this Series. Search 'beautyinthemoonlight1124' if you want to see pictures of characters, story elements, floor plans of the big old house and other buildings in the work, Family Tree charts, and other things.
Honeymoon in Paradise

Ali Krieger walked out of the surf, dripping wet, flipped her long brunette hair over her shoulder and wrung the extra water out of it with both hands. She wore a bright fuchsia bikini that tastefully covered more of her gorgeous body than her usual, sexy bikinis did. She was five months pregnant after all and she wanted to show a modicum of decency on the beach. She had gained about thirteen pounds so far and her baby bump was still pretty small. It definitely looked like a baby bump though, and not just some extra belly fat. The brunette swore that at least half of those thirteen pounds was in her breasts. They were a full cup size bigger than usual and still getting bigger. She had never in her life had breasts that swayed or moved or hung down. They had always been small. That was part of the reason Ali stayed as fit as she did. She was terrified of becoming one of those women whose belly was bigger than her breasts. Kyle used to tease her and call them her chicken cutlets because that’s about as big as they ever were. Well not anymore.

Her wife watched from their private cabana tent and licked her lips as Ali moved in the knee-deep water. The muscles in her arms flexed as she worked the sea water out of her hair and her quads contracted as she walked towards the beach. But it was her larger than normal breasts bouncing with every step that made her core twitch from her spot on the lounge chair. Ashlyn was sitting up at a 45-degree angle enjoying the show with a fruity drink in her hand and a smirk on her face. She thought back to her youth when she and Chris would watch Baywatch on tv together. The feelings she got from that show, the confusing early feelings and the delicious later feelings once she realized as she got older why she loved to watch that show every week, came back in a flash and fanned the already burning flame inside her. The only thing that could ever distract her from the brunette’s gorgeous breasts in that moment was her equally stunning smile. When she flashed it at her Ashlyn looked up and met her eyes as she trudged through the thick sand towards the tent.

“Quit staring at my boobs” she teased with a nose-crinkling grin as the keeper stood up and met her just outside the cabana with her towel.

“I can’t help it” she shrugged and blushed a little. “I’m only human and you’re an absolute goddess.”

They hugged as Ashlyn wrapped her wife up in the towel and then pulled back to share a soft kiss.

“You’ve got a little drool right here...” Ali teased as she kissed the corner of the blonde’s mouth. She quickly licked the corner of her wife’s lips and then stepped back to dry herself off, giggling. “Lord don’t get me started again.”

“Me?!” Ashlyn exclaimed as she sat back down in the lounge chair. “You’re the one out here walking around like that and looking like that and licking like that.” She crossed her long legs at her ankles and took another sip of her drink. “Don’t blame me.”

Maui really was paradise. The travel agents did not oversell the beauty of Hawaii, that was for sure. They were spending the last two weeks of January on their oft-postponed honeymoon and they had been on the island for three days so far. This was their first foray out into the world after spending two entire days in their unbelievable room, naked and in love. The luxury resort they were at was almost as beautiful as the natural landscape and seascape all around them. Neither of them had ever been to a place like that and they had both felt out of their element when they first arrived. It was the type of resort where the ultra-rich spent their time and money. When the story about Gram had come out during the 2018 NWSL season the details about further postponing their already postponed honeymoon had come out as well. Somehow Bob Kraft found out about it, probably through Julian Edelman, and called Ashlyn at the end of the season to discuss it. The
owner of the New England Patriots and New England Revolution had become part of the ownership group of the Boston Breakers a couple of months earlier and was apparently taking a more hands-on approach to the team. The billionaire was building a brand new soccer stadium in the same area that the Breakers played their games now. A pocket of real estate that was right where Cambridge and Boston met at the western side of the cities. He had been trying to get it built for the Revolution for the past couple of years but only recently got the final approval from both cities to actually start construction. The beautiful new stadium was almost finished and would be ready for the Revs home opener in early March. And now that he was co-owner of the Breakers they would also be able to call the fancy new digs home. Their own home opener was coming up in April and the players were beyond excited about the new owner and the new stadium.

Ashlyn had politely declined Mr. Kraft’s offer to help with the expensive honeymoon rescheduling fee, but apparently he had done it anyway. When they arrived at the airport their driver took them to the exclusive luxury resort instead of the more modest one they had reserved and that was that. The couple only felt bad about it for a day and then they got over it. The place was spectacular. There were three different pools and four different restaurants and even a dance club on the lower level of the huge resort. It made the fancy spa resort on Cape Cod seem quaint in comparison. They joked with each other those first two days about hiding out in their room because they were too shy to be out and about with these insanely rich people. But then they just relaxed right into it. They sipped fun, virgin, drinks by the pool – trying each different location before picking their favorite lounging spot. They felt a little bit underdressed so they went shopping that first day out of their room as well. And as much as Ashlyn complained about how much Ali loved shopping, the blonde had a great time too and scored a couple of sweet new outfits. Who knew ‘resort wear’ was a whole, separate style and category of clothes?

Once they finally emerged after those first two days, the couple spent an equal amount of time exploring the island and adventuring as they did having sex and cuddling in their gorgeous room. Ali was the perfect amount of pregnant. She wasn’t feeling sick anymore but she wasn’t too big and uncomfortable to do things either. She got tired often and had to pee a lot, but she felt great, looked incredible and was in a wonderful mood as long as her wife kept her sexed up enough. They had to change up some of the activities they had originally planned for their honeymoon though, just to be cautious. They hiked and snorkeled and golfed but passed on the bikes and ziplines and horses. They went to an actual luau and Ashlyn tried to learn how to dance the hula. They took a helicopter tour of the island and got up insanely early one morning to go to the top of a volcano and watch the sunrise. As much as the brunette hated getting up that morning, she had to admit the sunrise was magnificent. It was really cold up there and she snuggled close to her wife as they waited and watched. It brought them both back to the freezing December morning in Gloucester when Ali had proposed to the love of her life. They surfed, and one of Ashlyn’s bucket list items got crossed off the list on that trip. Ali didn’t actually surf but she really wanted to. She stood waist deep in the ocean and got as close as she could to her love while she did one of her favorite things. Afterward, the keeper brought her wife out with her as she had done in Florida a month earlier. It still felt perfect sitting on the board holding Ali and their baby and Ashlyn couldn’t believe how lucky she was. They spent lots of time walking on the beach, arm in arm, and talking. One of the things that had happened the busy week before they left for Hawaii was Ali’s 20-week appointment with Dr. Comello. She was 5 months pregnant and it was time to get a better ultrasound picture and, hopefully, to learn the sex of their baby. They eagerly searched the ultrasound screen for the image of their little baby and Ashlyn shouted excitedly when they finally saw it.

“There she is!” the blonde squeezed Ali’s hand even tighter as she pointed at the screen.

“I see, I see” Ali replied, amused and moved by her wife’s enthusiasm.
Dr. Comello didn’t say anything for a few minutes, which was unusual for the friendly woman.

“What’s the matter doc?” Ashlyn asked cautiously. “You’re not saying anything.”

“Nothing’s wrong” Patty said quickly, knowing how nervous expectant parents were at times like that. “I’m just taking a good look...” she paused and Ali thought her head was going to explode from nerves and fear. “Yep, ok, I’m positive” the doctor grinned and turned to the two anxious women. “It’s a boy.”

The second time they spent two days in their luxurious room, naked and even more in love, was at the end of their two weeks in paradise. They had spent lots of time during their honeymoon talking about their baby boy. They had both been so stunned that they were having a boy, and not the girl that Ashlyn had been so sure about, that they hadn’t talked much about the specifics of it the week before they flew to Hawaii.

It was a busy week. After the appointment with Dr. Comello on Tuesday they went to the ceremony where Ali received her MBA on Wednesday evening and then to a celebratory family dinner with Ken and Vicki and the boys in the city right afterwards. Deb and Mike had flown up for it and Kyle and Nathan were there too. Sydney and Cash joined them because she was basically family too and always had been. And Whitney and Ryan were coming up for the NWSL draft that week and made the trip a little earlier to join the celebration as well. Ali hadn’t really wanted to go to the ceremony but she had been thrilled once she was there and it was happening. The exhilaration she felt when they called her name and she walked across the stage to receive her degree was incredible. She was proud of herself and the hard work she had put in to achieve her goal. Then that Friday night was the NWSL draft for the 2019 season. They held it in Minnesota, home of the other new team from last season, and it was the biggest show yet. It was well attended and well covered by the women’s soccer journalists. A couple of mainstream sports writers were there too and that was a big deal. It would take people like them to reach the rest of the sports world, the people who hadn’t fallen in love with soccer just yet. The NWSL had asked Ashlyn to be in Minnesota for the event and emcee it for them. Sort of be the color commentary and insider’s view for the many hours long event. The keeper really wanted to do it but declined because they were leaving early Saturday morning for the honeymoon and she wasn’t letting anything get in the way of that. She promised them that she would make herself available for the draft the next year, wherever it was being held, to go and help emcee it.

So by the time they had arrived in Hawaii they had barely had a chance to say anything to each other about the fact that they were having a boy instead of a girl. But once they were in paradise they talked about him a lot. Ashlyn felt silly for being completely wrong about the sex of the baby and regretted calling him a her for five months. Ali countered by saying she though it was good for him to get in touch with his feminine side, even at such a young age. She had at least made her wife laugh if not helped ease her embarrassment. But that baby boy caused them some lengthy discussions about what to name him. And harder discussions about how equipped they were to raise a little boy in the world when they had no idea what it was like to be one. At the end of their honeymoon, as they lay there soaking in their comfy two-person tub with the jacuzzi jets massaging their backs and their hands rubbing each other’s calves and feet they talked about their dilemma.

“Well there goes Linda or Marie for a middle name” Ashlyn said sadly. “I really wanted to name the baby after Gram. I just feel like she brought him to us. I know it sounds cheesy...”

“Stop babe” Ali chastised softly. “It’s not cheesy. I feel the same way. We’ll just have to think of something else. Gram’s name will just have to wait until we have a baby girl” she smiled broadly at the thought of having a boy and a girl in their little family someday.
“I guess.” Ashlyn still looked and sounded glum.

“Listen, you are not allowed to sound like this while talking about our beautiful baby boy. Not ok.” The brunette was only half teasing. “Let’s figure it out. We can use Harris as his middle name. How about that?”

“She married into that name though, it’s not really hers. Well, you know what I mean” the keeper replied, trying to adjust her attitude.

“Well what about her maiden...”

“Holatka” Ashlyn said at the same time the brunette spoke so neither of them heard each other.

“What?” Ali asked, intrigued by the hopeful look on her wife’s face.

“Holatka. That’s her family name, that’s where the native American ancestry comes from, on her dad’s side of the family.”

“Holatka” Ali repeated with more than a little bit of doubt in her mind. It certainly wasn’t attractive. But it was strong and it stood for something meaningful. And, most importantly, it was significant for her wife.

“What do you think?” Ashlyn asked. Her voice was tentative but her eyes told the brunette just how much she wanted it.

“I think it’s a great way to honor Gram and that part of your family history too” she grinned at her keeper. “I love it.”

The truth was, Ali had already decided that she wanted to work as many family names from Ashlyn’s side into their children’s names as possible. They were going to be Kriegers so her family was already very visibly represented. She hadn’t discussed her plan with the blonde yet. She didn’t want her to protest against it or insist that they had to equally distribute family middle names or something completely sweet like that. If they needed to have that conversation at some point then they would. Coming up with their son’s first name was proving to be significantly more difficult for them. Chris and Beth had already taken both of Ashlyn’s grandfather’s names, John and Francis. What they both agreed on was that they wanted a nice, normal first name to go with Holatka. But that was all they could agree on for a long time. They found themselves discussing it again later that afternoon, after their soak in the tub.

“It goes without saying, but just in case, the ‘no exes’ rule still applies here” Ashlyn gave her wife’s butt a tap as they lay in bed after more sex. Ali was stretched across the blonde’s stomach diagonally, one leg still between two longer ones and her head on a pillow by her wife’s shoulder. One breast each moved against the other’s as they caught their breath and recovered. Ali’s hand was playing with the keeper’s hair and occasionally caressing her cheek. “No exceptions.”

Ali giggled. “Well, that won’t be too hard. It rules out Adam, Brent and Willem. None of which were going to make the list anyway” she grinned and kissed the blonde’s bare shoulder.

“Good, I’m glad we got that out of the way” the keeper grinned back. “So what are the boys names in your family?”

“Ok well, Kyle Johnson, Johnson was my mom’s maiden name” Ali began. “And my dad is Kenneth Robert. The Robert is my grandfather’s first name and his middle name was Henry, I think, or Howard? I’m not sure.”
“What’s Uncle Scott’s middle name?”

“What’s Uncle Scott’s middle name? That was kind of a family thing. The oldest son takes the mom’s maiden name as his middle name. Scott Warner, Kyle Johnson, Jeffrey McNeil...”

“Who the hell is Jeffrey McNeil?” Ashlyn asked with a chuckle that made Ali chuckle too.

“My cousin Jeff, Scott’s son...follow along Harris” she quipped and playfully pinched her wife’s exposed nipple.

“Hey!” the blonde laughed and grabbed Ali’s hand to keep it from pinching again. “How about your mom’s father and brother?”

“Grandpa was Milton Eugene Johnson...”

“Wow” Ashlyn interrupted. “No and no thank you” she giggled.

“Cut it out” the brunette tried to free her hand so she could poke her bratty wife but Ashlyn was too strong. After a minute she gave up and continued answering the question. “And my uncle was Eugene Thomas” she paused. “Now you can make fun of that one too.” Her voice sounded wounded and Ashlyn couldn’t tell if she was genuinely upset or not.

“Oh come on Al, are you seriously trying to tell me that you would consider Milton or Eugene for our boy’s first name?” the keeper asked with a grin.

“No” Ali admitted, trying again to free her hand. “But you don’t have to be a jerk about it” she giggled. When she failed again to get her hand back she moved her body down and nipped at the side of her wife’s newly exposed breast.

“Alright, alright” Ashlyn laughed and wrapped both arms around her girl, pulling her back up so they were chest to chest again and holding her tight. They kissed for a minute and then gazed at each other from six inches away. “No family tradition on that side? No passing maiden names down?”

“I honestly don’t know if it was a thing or not, but my grandmother’s maiden name was Scaglione so they might have just decided not to do that to poor uncle Gene.” Ali laughed as she watched her keeper’s face try to take in the mouthful of a last name.

“That’s your mom’s Italian heritage right there, right?”

“Yep. Well, technically, Scaglione is Sicilian, but you’re close enough” the brunette clarified and gave her wife another kiss.

“Wow, so you’re not just Italian” Ashlyn quirked an eyebrow at her beautiful brunette. “You’re super duper Italian. Now I understand your temper a little better” she teased.

“Ha ha, very funny” Ali put her head down on Ashlyn’s shoulder and nuzzled her forehead into her warm neck. “Let’s hear yours now, smartass.”

“Ok, you ready?”

“Lay ‘em on me babe. Go.”

“Gramps was Francis Christopher. Dad is Michael Francis. Then Christopher Ryan. Aunt Marie
named her son David Francis. On the other side, Grandpa was John Edward Burnham. The boys were Edward Dodge and John Thomas. That’s Eddie and Jack. Grandpa’s sister’s grandson, remember the one in New Hampshire? He’s Jeremiah Edward. And that’s it.”

“Yeah, but what were the other names from her bible” Ali pursed her lips in thought. “Lilian started with her own parents so we’re missing two...”

“Oh that’s right” Ashlyn agreed. “James Robert Dodge was Lilian’s father. And Grandpa’s father was John Edward Burnham Senior, or the first or however you say that.”

“Wow, that’s impressive honey” Ali complimented the blonde. “It’s been a couple of years since you did all of that research.” She kissed her wife’s neck in approval. “So we’ve got a bunch to choose from on your side and I didn’t hear a single stinker like Eugene or Milton either. How is that possible?” she chuckled.

“Those yankees they didn’t mess around. They got a family name they liked and they stuck with it” she joked about her own ancestors.

“I heard a lot of Edwards and Johns and I don’t love Edward and we can’t use John so let’s eliminate those two. What do you think? Do you love the name Edward?”

“I do not” the keeper answered as she began to caress her wife’s bare back. “Are you cold baby?”

“No, I’m good. And that feels nice. Thank you.” Ali tilted her chin up and kissed her wife’s jaw. “I like James and Thomas and I guess Robert’s ok too.”

“I like Dodge. That’s the coolest name” Ashlyn enthused.

“Dodge Holatka Krieger” Ali said flatly. “Um, no. I’m not doing that to our poor child.”

“It’s definitely not the normal name we were shooting for” Ashlyn agreed with a frown. “It’s so cool though. Dodge Krieger.”

“I like it too, but not with Holatka.”

“We have to keep the Holatka, for Gram” the keeper said definitively. “I really want to do that and I’m sorry it’s messing up...”

“Ash, it’s not messing anything up. There are a million names we can pick for his first name. This is just the very beginning. We’re only looking at family names right this minute.” She leaned up and kissed her keeper’s lips softly. “Don’t worry. We’ll find the right first name. And it might not be a family name and I’m ok with that. Are you?”

“Yeah, I am.” Ashlyn smiled weakly at her wife and Ali could see her disappointment.

“But here’s a promise. If we have another boy we’ll name him Dodge, ok?”

“Deal.”

It was harder to leave their island paradise than they thought it would be. It had been the most relaxing two weeks of their lives together and they both felt like they had made the most of it. They ate too much of whatever they wanted, saw almost everything there was to see on the island, and had so much sex that even pregnant Ali and her insatiable libido couldn’t ask for more. And most of all, they felt more connected than ever. When they had first gotten together they used to have their bubble time when they would just lay around the house, hopefully naked, and not let anything
interrupt their one or two days together. That was partly why they still celebrated their anniversary in February too. It was six months apart from their wedding anniversary in August and it was the perfect prompt for them to take some time and reconnect, no matter how busy they were. Last year had been difficult for numerous reasons and they weren’t able to connect as often as they wanted to. On their last day in Hawaii they promised each other that they would do better this year, even with the new baby coming. Ali was due in the middle of May so they made a deal to make some bubble time at the end of April so they could recharge that battery for the long, trying months that they knew would come after the baby was born. It seemed silly to schedule out that time but that’s what people meant when they talked about marriage being work. You had to carve out the time you needed to nurture your relationship. They both came from parents who had divorced. They knew how easy it was for a marriage to fail and there was no way they were going to let that happen to theirs.

“As long as we’re together and in synch” Ashlyn said sincerely as she held Ali’s hand on their ride to the airport. “There’s nothing we can’t do.”
February in New England was not nearly as nice as January in Hawaii had been. It was a particularly nasty winter month that year. They had three big snow storms all in the shortest month of the year and there was about two feet of snow covering everything. It had been dangerously cold for the first two weeks and nobody wanted to be outside doing anything. Ali and Ashlyn celebrated their February anniversary on Friday February 8 by going to dinner and then coming home and relaxing in their new soaking tub. They laughed about how lame their evening was but they honestly didn’t care. It had been their first week back in the real world and neither one of them had enjoyed it very much. Ali had been excited to start working full time at Knight-Harris for the first time ever. She was happy to see that things had run smoothly while they were away. But her first real task was going to be finding them legitimate office space sooner rather than later. The NWSL and NWHL were both growing and that meant more clients for the young, successful company. The NWSL was a much more stable league than their professional hockey playing sisters, but the NWHL had made great strides in the past two years. The US hockey team won their fifth World Championship in a row, after successfully boycotting the prestigious tournament in March of 2017. The real kicker was that the tournament was being held on American soil for the first time in a very long time and it would have been an incredible embarrassment to US Hockey and the whole country if the host team couldn’t find enough players to form a team. US Hockey gave in and the women were able to finalize negotiations that they had been working on for over a year with their federation. Then, buoyed by that bit of notoriety and fame, when the women’s hockey team won the gold medal at the 2018 winter Olympics the following year, the sport became more popular than ever. Finally the NWHL had enough support to keep their league alive albeit growing at a painfully slow rate. They went from four professional teams to six teams in 2018 and were scheduled for eight teams this coming 2019-2020 season. That meant more young women who needed agents and good representation. The athletes knew that a firm founded by two athletes, and two female athletes at that, was one they could trust and believe in. It was amazing to see how quickly young female athletes signed on with K-H. If you were a young, female athlete who wasn’t sure what to do or where to put your trust, where would you feel comfortable? It was just that easy.

But taking care of all of their new clients was becoming a challenge. Jen and Paige needed help and as much as Ali wanted to dive in and start functioning as an agent, she knew that her time that year was going to be limited once she had the baby. She decided to keep her involvement at the executive level that year, except for Ashlyn and Hilary of course. K-H needed to hire at least one more agent and probably two if they wanted to start getting into the WNBA market as well. They had also been contacted by a young, rising talent in the Women’s golf market as well as another in the Women’s tennis market. The only limit to the company’s growth that year would be their infrastructure and their ability to handle the workload. Jared was still crushing all of the social media and marketing for the company. Both Ashlyn and Ali thanked the Lord every day for bringing that brilliant and talented young man into their lives. 2019 was the year where they could grow their business if they invested in it. It was a little scary, but Ali had learned that investment was the most important element to growing a successful business. It was the old ‘if you build it, they will come’ theory. K-H might not need a full-time IT guy yet but if they hired one then he could help them get to the point where they would indeed need him every day. But they had to be smart. This was the time when they could overspend too easily on things like office equipment or laptops or company phones and shoot themselves in the foot when it came to the bottom line at the end of the year. But they had to have an office space. Ali had met with Jared, Ashlyn and Hilary, via phone, to discuss the logistics and they had all agreed that it was the top priority. They didn’t want to break the bank on a lease but they also didn’t want to have to move again in another year after another growth spurt. Ideally, they would buy their own building so they wouldn’t have to
worry about landlords and leases and other things that were out of their control. But there weren’t a lot of buildings up for sale that met their criteria. It would be a tough search and they knew it.

“Why don’t you ask Sarah to help you find a space?” Ashlyn asked one afternoon the following weekend while they were playing in the backyard with the dogs. The weather that week had finally warmed up to the low-30s so it was bearable to be outside. “She worked on mostly commercial projects, right? I mean, that’s why you didn’t work together more often in the first place, right?”

“Yes, that’s right” Ali replied as she finished rolling a giant snowball and carried it over to the snowman they were building. The snow was deep and hard to move through but the dogs had made paths of their own so it was only knee deep snow instead of thigh deep. “I never really thought about it” she shrugged as she carefully placed the head on top of the middle of the snowman. “I don’t know if she’ll be any help but it can’t hurt to ask.”

“She’ll know what buildings are being worked on and maybe which ones are about to be worked on and stuff like that, won’t she?” Ashlyn asked as she brought some snow up to stuff into the neck of the snowman to help keep the head in place.

“Look at you” the brunette smiled at her wife. “Like you’ve been doing it all your life.”

“I had a pretty good teacher” Ashlyn winked at the brunette and brought more snow up to fill in a few rough spots on the middle and lower sections of the snowman. “What about some of your builder contacts? I know you worked mostly with the residential builders but they still might know something going on.”

“That’s tough though. Unless we want our office to be up here on the North Shore my guys won’t be too much help.” Ali walked towards the back fence near the woods as she talked. “I’ll have to think about some of the developers I worked with. I did have a couple of guys in Cambridge that did small commercial stuff. They might be my best bet.”

The dogs both ran circles around Ali as she leaned over the fence and grabbed some sticks from one of the trees there. The snow had been so heavy last week that a lot of branches had come down, thankfully nothing very big. Ashlyn called the dogs so they wouldn’t be under the brunette’s feet. She threw one of Persey’s favorite bright orange rubber balls for her and it disappeared six inches into the snow on the other side of the yard. The brindle dog watched it like a pointer on point and took off after it as fast as she could. She jumped and lunged through the deep snow that wasn’t on any of their little trails. When she was about a body length away from the spot she took one final leap and landed right at the spot with her nose down into the snow and her butt wagging like crazy. It was one of Ashlyn’s favorite things to watch. That last leap made her ears flap out as she lowered her head to get ready to shove it into the snow and the blonde could not stop smiling whenever she saw it happen. Sometimes Persey was right on the spot and found the ball on the first dive. But more often than not, she had to root around a little bit for it. She’d pull her head out, snow covering her entire snout, butt still wagging, and quickly look around for a few seconds before burying her head into another section of snow nearby. She usually found it on the second try but if that failed she would move around a little bit and stick her nose a couple of inches into the snow and try to catch the scent of the ball. The whole thing made Ashlyn happier than most other things could. Once Persey found it she popped up, face covered in snow, with the ball in her mouth and started to leap her way back to the keeper so they could do it all over again.

“It’s a good idea though babe. I’ll see what I can find out” Ali finished her thought as she turned to walk back towards the snowman from the back fence.

Fred was different. He could not have cared less about the ball. He only wanted the ball because that meant that there was a good chance that Persey would chase him. Fred liked sticks and being
chased and it was unclear which he truly preferred. But he knew Persey wasn’t going to chase him while somebody was willing to throw her the ball so he focused his attention on the sticks Ali was carrying back with her. But the brunette knew her pups well. She had found the longest, thickest stick she could reach and carried that with her for her boy Fred. She didn’t want him to eat the snowman’s arms if she could help it.

“Oh, look at this one Freddy boy” she said excitedly, getting the caramel dog’s attention. She waved the big stick around in front of her and tossed it towards the corner of the yard by the back of the garage, away from the snowman. “Get it!”

She watched as the decidedly less coordinated dog ran and jumped through the deep snow to get to the stick that had sunk about an inch under the top layer of snow. Both dogs were pretty big. Persey was a bit more slender and slight, but not much. She was about 65 pounds and stood about knee high on the women. Her head came up to their thighs. Fred was bigger and more solid, weighing in just under 75 pounds. He was slower and less agile and much lazier than his energetic sister. He was the teddy bear of the family. He was the one that would lie there while Noah or Cash crawled over him and hugged him and grabbed his fur too hard. Ali chuckled as she watched him gingerly push his face into the snow to get the big stick. Fred also did not like to be wet. The dog literally walked around puddles if he could. It was too funny. He finally got the stick and carried it a couple of feet before he decided it was too much trouble to get back to one of the paths to lie down. So he just plopped down in the deep snow and made himself comfortable so he could get to work, chewing on his prize.

“Crazy dog” Ashlyn laughed as she watched him.

“He has simple tastes” Ali quipped. “I love that about him.”

The joke was that poor Fred hadn’t made a decision in two years. It was Persey who was the more high-maintenance of the two. She was the one who whined to go outside or barked to come inside. So Fred went out when Persey wanted to go out and was forced to come in when Persey wanted to come in. He was just easy. The only really bad habit he had was rolling in dead things. He had been the primary reason they had George install a rinsing area right outside the mudroom door last year. It was basically like the bottom of a shower with a short, eight-inch curb around a drain. There was a spigot and a hose right there on the side of the house for it too. They said it was so everybody could rinse themselves, or at least their feet, off from the sandy beach before coming inside the house. But it was really so they could give Fred a bath after he’d rolled in dead fish at the beach again without having to bring him inside the house.

“Here” Ashlyn met her wife at the snowman as they put the finishing touches on him. “One carrot” she said as she stuck his nose into his head. “And two eyes.” She stuffed two pieces of charcoal from the grill in next.

“His arms are a little wonky but I think he pulls it off” Ali said as she finished inserting a thin stick into each of his sides.

She wrapped a Breakers scarf around his neck while the keeper put a red Boston Red Sox cap on his head and took a couple of pictures with her phone. Ashlyn pulled one of her Go-Pros out and started filming the dogs and the snowman and the beautiful afternoon. She threw the ball and recorded Persey doing her leap, complete with ear flaps flying. And she got some good, but boring, footage of Fred being Fred. After he had finished chewing the big stick into a hundred little tiny stick bits he had rolled onto his back and started rubbing it like crazy against the snow, barking and growling at the same time. Then he jumped up like something bit him and started running around after Persey. Nothing, of course, had bitten him. He just did that sometimes.
“Crazy dog” Ashlyn said again as she shook her head with a grin.

As they were getting ready to go inside they stood close to the back of the house to get a wider view of the yard and the dogs and their adorable snowman. They hugged and kissed each other for a minute and then watched in disbelief as the dogs started circling the snowman like wolves on the hunt. After about three full circles Fred reached up and took one of the snowman’s arms out of his side and chewed it to bits in a matter of seconds. Persey, clever girl, had her eye on the carrot. The dogs loved carrots and they received them as treats sometimes. Ashlyn hadn’t thought of that when she was getting the carrot for the nose earlier. Ali had never encountered the problem before so they were both surprised when the brindle dog finally got up the nerve to stand on the front of the snowman and try to reach for the carrot. She was tall enough to do it on her hind legs, but she was just timid enough to not get it the first two tries. By then Fred had finished his stick and was wondering what his sister was up to. He stood on the front of the snowman on his hind legs and realized what Persey had been after. He carefully grabbed the end of the carrot and tried to pull it out. It took him two tries to get it all the way out but he finally did it and started to carry it off proudly so he could eat it. But Persey ran around him and grabbed it right out of his mouth.

“Ok, doggies, hold on” Ali said as she trudged over to Persey and took the carrot from her mouth. She broke it and gave them each half as she patted them both. “There you go. Good dogs.”

As she turned around to head inside and warm up she saw that her keeper had her Go-Pro up and had filmed the whole thing. The picture she took the next morning with Fred sitting up tall next to the snowman was priceless. Ashlyn took about twenty pictures in a row, hoping one of them would turn out well. The one that was the best was Fred with his head tilted up towards the snowman’s head. It looked like they were whispering something to each other and it was the cutest picture Ali had ever seen. The keeper posted the video and the picture on social media later that day and it was one of the most popular things she’d ever posted. The only thing that had received more hits and likes was the picture two years ago announcing her engagement and the two new puppies.

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“Babe, what the hell does the New England Historic Genealogical Society keep mailing you letters for?” Ali asked her wife as she sorted through the mail she had just brought up from the curbside mailbox.

“What?” Ashlyn asked, a slight panic in her voice as she walked to the desk in the mudroom from the kitchen.

“These letters” Ali held the latest one up for her wife to see. “This is, like, the third one. What gives?”

The keeper struggled with what to do for almost a full minute as Ali continued to look through the other mail, distracted enough not to notice Ashlyn’s panic right away.

“Ummm...” the blonde said like an idiot and gave herself away.

“Ok” Ali left the rest of the mail alone, clutched the NEHGS letter in one hand and pulled her wife behind her into the living room with the other. They sat on the couch where the sleeping dogs got up, stretched, and relocated themselves next to the women. Persey had her head in Ashlyn’s lap.

“What?” Ashlyn asked, a slight panic in her voice as she walked to the desk in the mudroom from the kitchen.

“She’s up.” Ali held the latest one up for her wife to see. “This is, like, the third one. What gives?”

The keeper struggled with what to do for almost a full minute as Ali continued to look through the other mail, distracted enough not to notice Ashlyn’s panic right away.

“Ummm...” the blonde said like an idiot and gave herself away.

“Ok” Ali left the rest of the mail alone, clutched the NEHGS letter in one hand and pulled her wife behind her into the living room with the other. They sat on the couch where the sleeping dogs got up, stretched, and relocated themselves next to the women. Persey had her head in Ashlyn’s lap.

“Spill” the brunette instructed.

Ashlyn spent the next several minutes explaining how she and Whitney had both hit dead ends with the research into Captain Leighton and the big old house. She told her wife how she had wanted to surprise her for a wedding gift with the story of the sea Captain’s house. But the research
hadn’t been completed until after the wedding and by the time it was done they were all dealing with Ashlyn’s injuries and the Championship game they had lost. And then Gram shared her bad news and, the rest, as they say, was history.

“They’ve been emailing me and calling me and now I guess they’re trying to reach me by snail mail.”

“Why haven’t you called them back Ash?” the brunette squeezed her wife’s thigh affectionately as they sat next to each other and talked. “Do you not want to know the story anymore?”

“No! I really want to know the story” she looked down at her lap and petted Persey’s head. “I guess I’m just embarrassed that I never got back to them. I feel like an idiot.”

“Did you pay them for the research?”

“Half. You pay half of the estimated amount at the beginning and then you pay the balance, adjusted by how much time they actually spent doing the research, at the end when they walk you through everything and give you your set of the documents and stuff.” The keeper still hadn’t lifted her eyes from her lap.

“So let’s call them back and go find out the story” the brunette said enthusiastically. “I think it’s awesome that you did this babe. I don’t understand why you’re so weird about it but it doesn’t matter. You had a lot going on and you haven’t been able to dedicate any time to this until now. That’s all.” She explained, giving her wife the words to say to the NEHGS people when she called them.

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Ali’s six month appointment with Dr. Comello had gone well. She was on track with everything and February was going just as well as January had in terms of her pregnancy. She had gained five more pounds and they were all definitely in her belly this time. The only new symptom she had was occasional heartburn and Patty explained that it was usually because the baby was just taking up space in there and making it harder for her stomach to do its’ job. She told the brunette to make sure not to eat right before going to sleep and that should help.

The brunette’s cravings were...interesting. The weirdest one was black licorice. Normally she hated it. She had disliked it as long as she could remember and even incurred the disappointment of her maternal grandmother because of it. Deb thought Ali had some sort of bad experience with anisette as a little girl and it soured her on black licorice, or anything that tastes remotely like anisette, for life. Both Deb and her mother made traditional anisette cookies at Christmastime and Ali had never liked them. Her mother was sure the brunette had somehow accidentally gotten some straight anisette during a baking session. So for Ali to crave black licorice now was really a turnaround for her. The other cravings she experienced were peaches and it didn’t matter in what way. They could be fresh or sliced and from a can. Ashlyn brought her home a peach pie one day and she was sure her wife was going to eat her fingers along with the pie she inhaled it so fast. Haagen-Dazs butter pecan ice cream was another one. She typically liked it but it definitely wasn’t her favorite. Ali’s favorite ice cream was cookie dough fudge. But something about being pregnant made her absolutely crave the butter pecan. And it had to be Haagen-Dazs butter pecan. The last really strong craving the brunette had was for a chicken pot pie that was made by a company that had three different locations around eastern Massachusetts. The original, and best, location was just down the street from her old house in Stoneham. That meant Ashlyn had to drive 40 minutes each way to get a chicken pot pie for her pregnant wife if she wanted one. And they weren’t just ready all the time. They took an hour to bake so you had to put your order in and then wait an hour to go get your pie. The blonde finally smartened up and bought a couple of frozen ones while she was there.
picking up a hot one in February. She didn’t tell Ali about them, she just put them down in the deep freezer in the basement for emergencies.

That was another thing that started happening in February. Ashlyn’s nesting went to another level. They had both started to work through Ali’s long list of things to do before the baby got there. It was silly to wait since the list was stressing the brunette out. Ashlyn was worried about things like losing power in a storm and not being able to heat up a bottle or keep Ali’s pumped breast milk cold. So she bought a generator and a deep freezer and had them installed down in the basement. They agreed to paint the nursery in neutral greens and yellows and the keeper was going to do that before the end of the month. They were going to use the crib and furniture that Ashlyn had bought for Meg but once the nursery was painted the blonde started to see how different the room looked. She also wanted to give Ali a chance to pick out a crib and furniture for their baby instead of just agreeing to use Meg’s. The brunette hadn’t realized how much she wanted to do that until they started looking at different cribs. It was just the type of thoughtful, wonderful thing that she had come to expect from Ashlyn. Ali would never take it for granted.

Another perfect example of the keeper going above and beyond for her pregnant wife was the new, two-person soaking tub she had George install in the master bathroom while they were away on their honeymoon. A bathroom renovation wasn’t really what they had planned to spend money on that January but the fact that Bob Kraft had paid for their resort for them freed up quite a bit of cash for the couple. The blonde would have done it anyway, but she felt even better about the decision after Mr. Kraft’s generous intervention. George ripped out the two-person shower and their conventional tub and installed the larger soaking tub along the left side of the bathroom where the shower had been. They had just enough room between the soaking tub and the double vanity along the back wall for a standing shower stall. It was clear glass just like the big one had been and it was a really nice shower, it was just a single instead of a double. They could both still fit in there if they wanted to. They would just be limited with what they could do while they were in there, that’s all. And if Ashlyn was really in the mood for roomier shower sex they could always use either of the perfectly functional and normal size shower and bathtubs in either of the other two bathrooms. The keeper had been nervous when they got home from their honeymoon, all of a sudden wishing she had involved her wife in the decision. But she had subtly talked with her about it since their October weekend on the Cape and knew what the brunette wanted in a soaking tub.

“Oh Ashlyn” Ali gasped when they finally made it up to their bedroom. “What did you do?” she asked excitedly as she stepped further into the bathroom and saw the beautiful new tub.

“What did you do?” she asked hopefully. “Please tell me you like it.”

“Oh honey, I love it” the brunette turned and wrapped her thoughtful wife in a hug before turning back to look at the new tub again. “But your shower” she frowned and looked at the blonde again. “Are you sure this is what you want babe?”

“Well I’m sure as hell not changing it again!” Ashlyn laughed as they looked at the new shower stall. “I think we’ll spend more time in the tub together than we did in the shower. And I know you’ll get a lot more use out of that tub than I would the old shower. It makes perfect sense and I really like how it turned out. But please be honest with me Al. Don’t just tell me you like it, even though that’s exactly what I asked you to do” she rolled her eyes at herself.

“I love it” Ali answered slowly and emphasized every word so there could be no confusion. “Thank you honey. You’re so sweet and I love you too.”
It felt like an episode of ‘Who Do You Think You Are?’ and Ashlyn and Ali were both very excited as they waited in the lobby of the New England Historic Genealogical Society on Newbury Street in downtown Boston. It had been a week since the keeper had called them and apologized for being so hard to reach. She explained the illness and death in the family and asked if she could still come and get the details on the sea captain and his house. The genealogist who was going to guide them through the history of Captain Andrew Leighton, and, hopefully, his descendants, entered the room and introduced himself. He was a typically bookish looking, older man in his 60s wearing glasses and a cardigan. He invited them to follow him into one of the library rooms where they took seats around what looked like an antique table. It was covered with several documents and a few big, old books with a handful of bookmarks sticking out of each one of them.

“The good news is that we were able to learn a lot about Captain Andrew Leighton himself. The bad news is that we don’t have too much information on his descendants. But I know your primary focus is on the history of the house itself. Is that still correct?”

“You’ve got it Dan” Ashlyn nodded in agreement. “We’d like to know anything you can tell us about any of it, but yes, how the house came to be up for auction in the 1970s is what we’re really after.”

“Well let’s start at the beginning then, with the Captain himself” he paused and passed a piece of paper down the table to them. They were all sitting close together on the same side of the long table, Ashlyn in between her wife and the genealogist. “This is a copy of his obituary that ran in the Boston Globe on June 27th, 1887.”

They put their heads close together so they could both read the obituary at the same time.

‘AN OLD FISHERMAN DEAD.
—Captain Andrew Leighton, one of the leading fishermen and fishing owners of this city, died this morning. He was the best known among the Gloucester fishermen, and will be missed by all. He was the first friend the fishermen had, always ready to assist every one. He was born in Cumberland, Me. and when a young man went to sea. He was a practical and successful fisherman and a constant worker. In 1866 he stopped going for fish and became a successful merchant. Prominent fishing captains said today that Captain Leighton would be missed by the entire fishing interest of Gloucester. At one time he amassed over $250,000 in the fishing business and of late years had large and valuable vessels. Property depreciated, but he leaves about $240,000. Up to his last sickness he was always to be seen upon his wharf hard at work. He owned the whole of 12 fine fishing schooners, and part interest in some half a dozen more. About two years ago he lost some $200,000. When fish was low he said it was an outrage to pay the fishermen such low prices as were being paid, and paid his men 26 cents more on a quintal of fish than was paid by the others. He was noted for his benevolence and generosity to all, and especially to the widows of men who
were lost in his employ. Captain Leighton was 67 years of age and leaves a widow and five girls and one son. He was a member of Acacia Lodge of Masons. He was a bold defender of American fishing rights and pronounced in his views, offering to fit every one of his vessels with men and arms to protect the rights of Americans. The funeral will take place from his late residence Tuesday at 2 p.m.

“Wow. There’s so much information right here” Ashlyn marveled as she looked at the genealogist. “In 1887, $250,000 was a whole lot of money, wasn’t it?”

“It certainly was. That would be about $6 million today.”

“Oh my God” Ali said quietly. “He was rich.”

“Yeah, but it says he lost $200,000” Ashlyn frowned.

“That’s right. If you’d like I can tell you what we know.”

The genealogist patiently explained about the history of commercial fishing in Gloucester in the 1800s to give the women an idea of what life was like back then.

“Commercial fishing exploded in the mid-1800s. Men of Italian, Canadian, West Indian, and especially Portuguese descent flocked to Gloucester to find work in the fisheries and escape the discrimination they encountered in other New England communities. By 1888, approximately 200 Portuguese families lived in Gloucester, making it the largest Portuguese community on the East Coast. By the late 1880s, nearly 400 vessels fished out of Gloucester. Captain Leighton owned almost 5% of them. That was a lot for just one captain.”

He passed down a document with some pictures of different fishing schooners so they could see what he was talking about.

“It was an incredibly tough life and it was very dangerous. They fished George’s Bank first. It was about a hundred miles East of Gloucester and took anywhere from 10 to 12 hours to get there, and twice as long to get back.”

“Because they were carrying all the fish they caught and the ship was heavier” Ashlyn added.

“Correct. People these days don’t understand how hard it was to fish back then. Besides the obvious hazards involved with sailing top-heavy ships through turbulent seas in every kind of weather you can imagine, once they got to the fishing grounds, Georges Bank for example, they fished from the side of the ship by hand.”

“By hand?” Ali’s jaw dropped.

“Here’s a list of some good websites you can research for more details on the daily life of a fisherman in the 1800s. You won’t regret looking into it if you’re interested in Captain Leighton’s life. He started as a fisherman and worked his way up to Captain.”

Ashlyn looked at the list quickly before passing it to her wife.

“The famous quote goes ‘The history of the Gloucester fisheries has been written in tears’ and it’s very true” Dan continued. “I looked up some stats to try and frame this for you so you could understand what made Captain Leighton so important to his community. Between 1866 and 1890, more than 380 schooners and 2,450 Gloucester men never returned from the fishing grounds. In a single storm on August 24, 1873, nine Gloucester vessels and 128 fishermen were lost.” He passed another of the documents over to them. This one was a copy of a news story about the tragic storm.
“In 1865, community members formed the ‘Gloucester Fisherman’s and Seaman’s Widows and Orphan’s Aid Society Fund’ to help fishermen’s families. Captain Leighton was the main contributor in that endeavor.”

“That’s what they meant in the obituary about taking care of the widows of his crews” the keeper surmised.

“That’s not all” Dan continued. “In addition to the fund, they built ‘The Widow’s House’ around 1870. It had ten apartments of three rooms each and the rent was $3 a month.”

“And he built that too, didn’t he?” Ali asked as she leaned forward to look at the picture of the Widow’s House Dan had just passed them.

“Right again” he smiled at the couple, so eager to learn. “One of the last things Captain Leighton worked on before his death, in alliance with several other local Captains, was a new schooner design to help prevent more deaths at sea. They were trying to build more modern schooners with deeper, more stable hulls and sail plans that didn’t require a long bowsprit, the spar that projected forward from the bow. Those bowsprits were known as ‘widow makers’ because they were so dangerous for the men to clamber out on to tend the sails.”

“Did they make the changes, eventually?” Ali asked as she looked at a cross-section picture of the way the old schooners were built.

“Yes they did. It probably saved hundreds of lives but we’ll never be able to track that number.”

“How did the Captain die?” Ashlyn asked, getting a little impatient.

“There was an outbreak of cholera that they believe came from one of the ships in the harbor, not one of his. He was older and he couldn’t fight it off. He died at home, in the house he loved so much, with his family around him.”

“People didn’t live to be 67 years old back then?” the keeper queried.

“Not very often, especially not if they fished for a living” the genealogist explained.

“What about this Acacia Masons Lodge?” Ali asked. “Is that the same as the Masons Lodges today?”

“Basically, yes. At the time it meant that he was a good man of upstanding character who believed in and was interested in improving himself and taking care of his family, his community, his country and his lodge.”

“So not just anybody could join?” the brunette questioned.

“No. You had to be invited and sponsored and then approved for membership. He was a long-standing brother or member in a leadership position in the lodge.”

“He sounds like he was a great guy. Is that his story? Or are you now going to tell us that he kept slaves in his basement and beat his children?” Ashlyn asked, only half-joking.

“No” Dan chuckled. “He was indeed a very well-respected, highly thought of leader of the community. The obituary wasn’t exaggerating anything. In my opinion it sort of sold him a little short. They could have said that he lost all that money because he established the Widows and Orphan’s fund and built the Widow’s House. That’s not exactly losing money, not in my opinion anyway.”
They looked over the documents for another minute and then Ali slid them back towards the genealogist.

“Oh no, those are copies for you to keep. We’ve got a folder here for you” he passed a fancy folder with the NEHGS logo on it to the brunette and smiled.

“Now what can you tell us about his family?” Ashlyn asked eagerly.

“His wife, Mary, was six years younger than he was but she was still fairly elderly when he died, for those days. She stayed in the house with her son and his family for several years before she passed away.”

Dan passed over a chart that showed the family tree that they had been able to research.

“Their son, James, was the youngest of their six children and he was 25 years old when Captain Leighton died. He was apparently not the man his father was. Captain Leighton had been sailing for about seven years by the time he was 25 and was about to become a Captain for the first time when he was 26. James grew up the only heir to a wealthy family and he never really had to work for anything. He was kind of a ladies man and he was good at spending his father’s money.”

“Was he married? You said Mary stayed with he and his family.” Ashlyn leaned forward like she was listening to somebody reading a good storybook out loud.

“He did get married. His father had stipulated in the will that he would inherit the money and property and business only if he got married and settled down.”

“Wow, it’s like a movie plot” Ali chuckled as she studied the family chart.

“Yes, well, those movies are based on real life I’m afraid” Dan shook his head before continuing. “James was also not a good businessman. His father had tried to teach him, and I’d like to point out, the Captain taught his daughters a lot about the family business too. We don’t know for sure, but he was a very smart man and I think he could see that his son was not cut out to be the only person in the family who knew anything about the family business.”

The genealogist showed them a couple of pictures of the Captain with one of his daughters.

“This was his second youngest daughter, Sarah. She was 33 when he passed away. She was never married which was pretty scandalous for a wealthy family back in those days. And further proves the point that the Captain was fairly enlightened for the times. He never forced her to get married. She was beautiful and smart and, again, we can’t know for sure, but I think she was the brains of the family and the one the Captain wanted to follow in his footsteps. But, of course, everything a woman could do or be was limited back then. She lived in the house with her parents and then with her mother and brother after the Captain died. She was also the local schoolteacher. The other girls were all married with their own families in 1887. Mariah, Amelia, Cathy and Tess. Two of them lived in Boston, one in New York City and the eldest, Mariah, stayed local and moved just up the road to Rockport.”

“How long did it take James to lose everything?” Ashlyn’s voice was almost angry.

“He didn’t lose everything” Dan smiled. “Captain Leighton had built such a good business with such capable associates that they were able to help James run the business. I’d bet his sister Sarah had a lot to do with it too. It never did as well, of course, but he didn’t run it into the ground. He settled down and got married. His wife bore him one child, a little boy they named James Jr., and they spent the rest of their lives in the house. But because James Sr. didn’t know much about the
business there was no way he could pass along any wisdom to his own son. James Jr. was born in 1892 and lived to be almost 60 years old. He was the one that lost everything as you so aptly described it” Dan smiled at the blonde.

“So, he would have died around...1952” Ashlyn calculated quickly in her head. “Is that when the house left the family?”

“The house was seized by the government, technically for non-payment of taxes, during World War II and turned into an official residence for an Admiral in the US Navy. He commanded the fleet that was stationed just off the coast, defending us from the German U-boats for the duration of the war.” He passed along a photograph of a naval officer standing inside the house with several other important looking people. “The house stayed in the government’s possession until it was put up for public auction in 1974, when your grandfather purchased it. After the war it was converted to a Home for Wayward Girls that was operated by a group of nuns for about twenty years. When the government funding for that ran out it was left empty until the auction, which would have been about seven or eight years we believe.”

“That’s incredible” Ashlyn said with wide eyes. “I’m so glad I had you do the research because I know I would never have been able to find all of that out.”

“Do you know anything about the Home for Wayward Girls?” Ali asked with a frown on her face. “I mean, was it the good kind of nuns like in ‘The Sound of Music’ or was it the bad kind of nuns that everybody’s always terrified of?”

“I’m sorry, we don’t know much about that. I didn’t do any specific research on the group itself…”

“That’s ok” the brunette replied. “I’ll see if I can find anything on it. I know that’s going to bug me though until I figure it out.”

“I understand the curiosity” Dan nodded. “If you decide you want me to do more research you can always give me a call” he slid his business card to the brunette.

“Thank you so much Dan” Ashlyn said with a satisfied smile on her face. She leaned back in her chair and surveyed all the documents on the table in front of her. “This is incredible. I wish I was related to the Captain. He seems like he was a wonderful human being.”

“I can’t argue with you there” the genealogist shrugged his shoulders. “It’s always a relief when I get to tell people, especially blood relatives, that their ancestor was one of the good guys. It’s no fun telling somebody that their great-grandfather was a nazi or something awful like that.”

Ashlyn and Ali shared a look and appreciated the bullet they had indeed just dodged. As long as the nuns weren’t evil they would both be pretty happy with what they had learned. The Puritan nuns had a tendency to be strict as hell, but not usually cruel or malevolent. Ali hadn’t admitted it to her wife, but she had been nervous waiting for this appointment. She didn’t know what she would do if they discovered something terrible had happened in the house. They gathered up all of the documents and put them carefully into the fancy folder, minds still reeling from all of the information they had just taken in. Dan walked them back to the lobby and thanked them for letting him help them with their research and that was it.

They took advantage of their time in the city and drove to the Gardiner Museum for a visit before heading home. The couple didn’t get to their first favorite spot very often so they jumped at the chance when they realized they had the perfect opportunity to go sit in the beautiful courtyard and get out of the snow for an hour or two. And that’s what they did. Both women were excited and emotional about sharing the beautiful space with their baby, even though they weren’t sure how
much he could feel. They were both pretty sure he would get the peace and relaxation and serenity that filled Ali’s body whenever she was there. It was one of the nicest afternoons they had ever spent together.

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Valentine’s Day was on a Thursday that year and they decided they wanted to go out and celebrate. Their February anniversary was so close to the big, romantic holiday that they had just done something really low-key at home the last couple of years instead of going out and dealing with the masses. This year it was Ali who wanted to go out and get dressed up and the blonde was certainly not going to say no to any of it. She was surprised though, because the brunette got tired pretty early and they both knew she was having a busy week at work trying to find a new office location for the growing company. Ali finally made it back to the big old house just after 5:30pm. She had told her keeper to be ready to go at 6pm so they could make it into Boston for their 7pm dinner reservation.

“There you are” Ashlyn said as she greeted her harried wife with a kiss just inside the mudroom door. “Are you ok? You’re home so late.”

She took Ali’s purse and briefcase from her and put them on the desk while the brunette took her coat off and hung it in the coat closet by the door. Ali looked beat. She had dark circles under her eyes and she just appeared frazzled and worn down.

“I’m so sorry Ash” she said in a rush. “I tried to call but I’ve been on the phone with Jared for the past hour while I sat in fucking traffic coming out of Boston.”

“You were just in the city?” the keeper furrowed her brow and led her wife into the living room and sat her down on the couch so she could put her feet up on the coffee table.

The dogs both came over and wagged themselves at the brunette while she patted them hello. Ashlyn was back in a minute with a glass of water that she handed to her wife as she stood there with a concerned look on her face.

“Thanks babe” Ali said gratefully as she took a big drink. “Ugh, what a day. I went to look at some office spaces and it just took so long and I’ve been on my feet all afternoon and my back is killing me.” She was rattling off the details of her day without really taking in the blonde standing in front of her. Ali finally looked up and blinked as she took her beautiful wife in. “Look at you…you’re gorgeous.”

The keeper wore a beautiful, black, cashmere sweater over a pink dress shirt with the crisp collar sticking out of the v-neck sweater just right. She had dark grey pants on and she had loosely curled her hair for the night. The blonde locks fell just below her shoulders in soft, wavy curls and framed her strong cheekbones and jawline. She looked good. The brunette raked her eyes up and down the sexy blonde for a good long minute and then burst into tears. Ashlyn was shocked and confused but recovered quickly and sat down next to her wife on the couch so she could hold her.

“Hey, it’s ok baby” she said sweetly as she pulled Ali into her arms, putting her glass of water on the coffee table. “I’m sorry you had such a hard day. Is everything ok though? I mean, you’re not crying because you’re in pain or hurt or anything, right?”

“No. I’m so sorry I’m such a mess” the brunette managed to get out between sobs as she tried to get herself under control. She sat up quickly and pulled away from Ashlyn like she was radioactive or something. “Oh God, I’m going to ruin your beautiful new sweater by blubbering all over it...” she paused and then burst into more tears.
“Honey, it’s ok. Look, I’m taking it off. Problem solved” she explained as she quickly pulled the sweater over her head and tossed it behind her on the couch. “There, see?” she tried to pull Ali’s hands away from her face but they wouldn’t budge. “Ali, please. It’s ok. Come here.”

This time when she tugged her brunette’s arms they gave way and Ali buried her face back into her keeper’s chest and kept crying. She was uncomfortable bending over her big belly like that though so they repositioned themselves so Ali was lying on her side with her head in her wife’s lap while Ashlyn stroked her side and hip and arm with her left hand and caressed her head and forehead with her right. They stayed like that for almost a half hour before the brunette’s breathing started to even out. When Ashlyn looked down to see how she was doing she was surprised to find the brunette fast asleep, breathing through her mouth because her nose was stuffed up from crying. The keeper turned the sound off on her phone and spent the next hour in that position reading about what might be going on in her wife’s 6 months pregnant body and mind. She quietly shushed the dogs when they whined for their dinner half-way through the hour. She finally felt her wife stir against her thigh and let out a soft little sigh after she stretched her sore back out. Ali rolled over onto her back, as much as she could with the back of the couch in her way, and looked up at her adoring wife.

“Hi” she said sleepily.

“Hi sugarplum” Ashlyn replied quietly and gently kissed her forehead.

There was a little bit of drool at the corner of her mouth and the blonde wiped it away with her thumb as she caressed her beautiful face. Ali smiled up at her and blinked a couple of times as she woke up and took in her surroundings.

“Oh my fucking God” she said loudly and covered her face with her forearm, slowly shaking her head side to side in frustration.

“Ali, please don’t cry again” the keeper implored. “I don’t care what we do tonight as long as I get to be with you I’m happy. Ok?” She leaned down again and placed another warm kiss on her wife’s forehead. She left her lips there for several seconds and then mumbled into it. “I love you so much honey and I’m happy right here with you. Please don’t be upset.”

Ashlyn had her left hand on the baby and she was moving her hand slowly and lightly across Ali’s belly. Normally she liked the way that felt and it soothed her so the keeper pretty much did it without even realizing she was doing it anymore. It was an automatic reaction anytime either of her hands was near Ali’s belly.

“I’m sorry sweetheart” the brunette started to apologize again, moving her forearm away from her eyes and reaching it up to play with Ashlyn’s soft curls instead. “This day just kicked my ass and then it took so long to get home...” she stopped again and took a deep breath. “We’ve missed our reservation and I’d rather cut my arm off than get back in the car tonight. Can we stay home and I’ll make it worth your while instead?” she winked up at her beautiful keeper who was smiling back down at her.

“I had a good nap” Ali said with a smirk.

“That sounds awesome” Ashlyn enthused with a twinkle in her eye. “We should eat though. I’m hungry so you must be starving...”

She stopped talking instantly and her eyes went wide. Ali’s face was doing the same thing as she stared back up at the blonde in disbelief. She put both her hands on her belly and moved them around slowly.

“Did you just feel that?” she whispered.
“I totally felt that” Ashlyn answered with a huge, dimpled grin. “There’s another one” she exclaimed as Ali squealed a little bit.

“Oh my God. Ashlyn. He just kicked. For the first time ever. Our son, just kicked!”

“Twice!” the keeper added as she bent over sideways towards the baby. She leaned on her left elbow and spoke directly to the baby bump. “Hi baby boy. We’re here buddy and we feel you kicking around in there. We love you so much and we can’t wait to meet you in a few more months.” She pressed her lips into the baby bump and hummed with happiness. “You take your time and just keep doing what you’re doing and grow big and strong, ok? We’ll see you soon.”

Chapter End Notes

When I was researching Captain's houses and getting ready to start writing this little fan fiction I saw some pictures of a house like the one I had pictured in my head. I used those pictures to help flesh out the big old house. When it came time to tell the Captain's story I went back to the research I had done and got the name from the house pictures I used. I figured what the hell? Let's see what I can find out about this captain before I go create one all on my own. Turns out he was a dud but to my amazement, I found Captain Andrew Leighton's actual obituary and I've included it, word for word in this chapter. So the dude is real. His house is a different captain's house but I'm ok with that (the pictures I used were from a captain's house in Georgia I think). And I completely made up the details about his family (other than what’s in the obituary) and the history of the house after his passing. Everything the genealogist explains is true, in terms of what it was like back then and how the fishermen lived and died. Anyway, just thought I'd let you know Captain Leighton was real and awesome.
Pregnancy Problems

Chapter Notes

Smut warning.

As her belly got bigger Ali started having some basic problems that she hadn’t anticipated. None of the books she had read talked about them either. At her 7-month appointment in March she had gained 23 pounds so far during her pregnancy. At her 8-month appointment in April she was up to 28 pounds. She was well within the recommended weight guidelines and she was having a very healthy and normal pregnancy so there was nothing to worry about. Her symptoms had changed a little bit. The heartburn got worse before it got better and was accompanied by some very annoying constipation. Both things were because all of her insides were sharing space with a growing baby boy. And along with the constipation, which busy Ali didn’t have time for and tried to just force her way through, came hemorrhoids. Sydney had warned her about them, knowing her best friend’s worry about that part of her body, and tried to explain what they felt like. But there was nothing that could have prepared Ali for the searing pain the first time it happened. She literally felt like her asshole was on fire and she had to make Ashlyn go to the drugstore and buy some Preparation-H because she couldn’t even sit so there was no way she could drive.

“Honey, what’s the matter?” Ashlyn’s voice was full of concern when she found her wife laying on her side across the foot of the bed with tears streaming down her face. She knelt in front of the brunette and tried to comfort her and find out what had happened. “What happened? Are you upset or are you in pain?”

Ali took longer than the keeper wanted to answer.

“Ali. Tell me what’s going on. Please” she said firmly, not hiding her fear very well.

It was an agonizing five minutes of the brunette trying to find a way to tell her wife that a hemorrhoid had popped out of her ass and was killing her with white-hot pain. Finally, Ashlyn couldn’t take it anymore.

“Al, if you can’t tell me what’s going on then I’m calling an ambulance...”

“Nooo!” she yelled, horror all over her face. “God.” She rolled her eyes and then closed them tightly as she covered her face with her hands. Her voice was an odd mixture of resignation and anger. “I have a hemorrhoid and it really fucking hurts.”

Ashlyn held her breath for a second and prayed to everything holy to help her not laugh at her poor, pathetic, suffering wife. Ali’s face and neck were beet red and her hands still covered her face as her crying let up a little bit.

“Aw baby, I’m sorry” Ashlyn leaned forward and kissed her wife’s hand, still across her face. “Those are supposed to be really painful. What can I do? What do you need?”

Ali never uncovered her face as she told the blonde what she needed and she hadn’t moved in the thirty minutes that the keeper was gone to get it. When Ashlyn jogged up the backstairs she frowned at the sight of her wife and found herself getting angry at the baby for causing Ali so much
When she had arrived at the drugstore and found the Preparation-H she was stumped as to what kind to get. There was a cream and an ointment and even suppositories. She pulled out her phone to call Gram and ask her what she should do. The keeper’s eyes closed and she dropped her chin to her chest for a few seconds. She felt the heavy weight of her loss but didn’t have time to dwell on it. She took a deep breath and called Sydney instead, explaining her dilemma. The coach, as always, gave clear instructions and told Ashlyn what to buy and how to apply it. Her last bit of advice made the keeper truly nervous.

“She will fight you tooth and nail but you should make sure she’s not bleeding from anywhere but the hemorrhoid. If she ever does then you have to take her in right away.”

“Syd, she’s not going to let...”

“She can’t see anything down there anymore Ash. She needs your help even if she doesn’t want it.”

As Ashlyn knelt in front of her beautiful, distraught wife she felt a wave of compassion and love that surprised her with its’ power. She thought back to the scary time when she had found Ali unconscious on her bathroom floor, sick with the flu. The blonde remembered the feeling she had as she stood there holding her sick girlfriend as she sat on the toilet and peed. And it had been the same when she had cleaned her up after that first orgasm in the shower during her horrible period cramps. That feeling of complete and utter love was the same that she was experiencing right now. She knew Ali would put up a fight. But she also knew she wasn’t going to let her win.

“Ok sweetheart, I’ve got what we need. I need to check and make sure...”

“I know” Ali’s voice was quiet and flat and her eyes were still closed. “Syd called me and told me I had to let you help me or she was going to come up here and do it her damned self.”

And the brunette let her wife help her, even though it killed her. It pained her physically because the hemorrhoid was terribly painful and it pained her emotionally because there literally was nothing left to hide from her wife. Ashlyn was continually awed by what a woman’s body went through as it carried a growing baby inside it. The miracle of life for sure. That’s what she chose to talk about as she helped her beautiful brunette treat her painful hemorrhoid. The reverence on her face and in her voice as she checked for bleeding, then carefully applied the ointment and kissed her exposed hip when she was finished was something that Ali would never forget. The blonde went and washed her hands and then came back and held her wife. Ashlyn spooned her from behind, careful not to put any pressure on her wife’s sore and sensitive backside. She pulled a pillow from the top of the bed and tucked it underneath their heads as she draped her arm around Ali’s stomach and held her close. She was relieved when she felt the brunette snuggle back into her chest.

“Thank you for letting me help you honey” she whispered and kissed her wife’s neck twice.

“I...I love you Ash.”

The brunette died a thousand deaths at her next appointment as they talked about her bowel movements and hemorrhoids. She had never been more mortified in her entire life, and that included the ER visit last year when she was severely constipated. Dr. Comello told them that once the baby dropped a little bit lower, which usually happened sometime during month 8, most of those symptoms would ease up. She instructed Ali not to fight the constipation or try to force things on the toilet. That was the main cause for the painful hemorrhoids. The flip side to the baby dropping was that the baby being lower meant more pressure on her bladder. Ashlyn found it hard
to believe that her wife could need to pee more often than she already did, but Patty gave her a look that told her it was no joke.

But aside from the symptoms, there were things that were difficult or nearly impossible for Ali to do anymore. She parked her truck at the grocery store and when she came out to get back into it she realized, in horror, that she couldn’t fit her belly between her truck and the car next to it that had parked a little too close. She was about to try and climb across from the passenger side door when the owner of the car arrived and solved the problem for her. Thank God. She had a hard time bending over to pick up anything that fell onto the floor. Ali was luckier than most because her legs were still in pretty great shape and very strong. But even she struggled every time she dropped her damned keys. Putting her shoes on was difficult unless they were something she could just slide into. Half the time when she managed to bend down to pick up her keys or tie her shoes she either peed a little bit or tooted without any warning. It felt like an unending series of degrading and demoralizing failures sometimes. But then she would remember that in another few weeks she would get to meet her baby boy and that made everything ok again. All of the pain and discomfort and indignities would be worth it.

The brunette’s sex drive hadn’t waned any but it had become more challenging to have sex with her wife because of her big belly. She never realized how much she would miss having her naked breasts pressed up against Ashlyn’s or being able to feel her keeper’s bare ass pushed back into her crotch as they spooned. God she missed that. The only position that really worked for them no matter what, was if Ali lay on her side, so that’s what they did. The other positions that were recommended for pregnant women worked sometimes, but if Ali’s back was sore it was just so much easier to not have to support the baby for a little while by lying on her side. It got a little boring but there wasn’t much they could do about it. The brunette wasn’t really interested in too much foreplay at that point either. They had a couple of conversations about it to make sure they both remembered that this was a temporary state for their sex life. Ashlyn was always an incredible combination of supportive and sexy and adoring when they made love, while still finding a way to say dirty things that made Ali’s toes curl. The new, slender dildo was a welcome addition and they used it right up through the eighth month. They were both too nervous to use it after that. The keeper was so good with her fingers that there was no use risking it.

The only thing that slowed Ali’s libido down was one of the basic things that had become difficult for her to do at 7 and 8 months pregnant. She couldn’t shave her legs or her bikini area anymore. It took Ashlyn a few days to realize that they hadn’t had sex in almost four days which was a record for Ali at that time. She was still on her every other day schedule for the most part. On the fifth day without sex the keeper decided to test her wife while they were putting things away in the nursery. Ali rocked in the glider chair with her feet up on the gliding stool in front of her and folded tiny clothes that she had just washed. Some were from Noah and others were from Cash. It was late afternoon in March and Ashlyn had just taken a shower after working out. She knew Ali couldn’t control herself if she saw the keeper’s bare skin, and especially not her wet, bare skin. She walked into the nursery in just her boxer briefs and sports bra, still a little damp from hurriedly drying herself off. Her hair was wet and she toweled it off as she stood in front of Ali and chatted about assembling the changing table so they could get it all stocked up. It didn’t matter what they talked about, she just wanted to watch Ali’s face to see if she still wanted sex as much. If she didn’t want it as much then that was fine and Ashlyn wouldn’t push it. But if she still wanted it and they weren’t having it then there was a problem somewhere that needed fixing.

“So what do you think?” Ashlyn asked as she set her t-shirt and joggers down on the stool near Ali’s feet and studied her face as she started drying her hair with the towel. Ali stopped folding the tiny clothes and struggled to hear the words her keeper was saying. All she could focus on was Ashlyn’s beautiful body as it moved in front of her. She watched the blonde
bend over and start combing out her hair, admiring the muscles rippling in her arms and abs as she moved. And her tattoos...the beautiful ink that covered more of her limbs than ever still made the brunette feel things deep inside. She felt her throat get dry as she swallowed hard and then felt a gush between her legs.

“Hellooo? Anybody in there?” Ashlyn teased as she stood up and cocked her head at her wife.

She definitely had her answer. Ali’s eyes were darkening more by the minute and she shifted in her seat and looked a little flushed. She looked like she’d been horny for a while, like, as in days.

“Oh, um, sorry babe” Ali looked down quickly and picked up another itty bitty onesie. “I wasn’t...I...I got distracted. What was the question?”

“I asked you why we haven’t had sex in five days” she smirked. “But you were too busy fucking me with your eyes to hear anything I said” she spoke with a little cockiness in her voice but she was careful not to push too far. She wasn’t sure what the problem was yet and she didn’t want to make the brunette feel uncomfortable about whatever was bothering her. “What’s going on?”

“Damn” Ali blushed furiously and threw a tiny pair of shorts at her keeper. “Put some fucking clothes on will you? You’re killing me” she groaned and leaned her head back against the glider.

“Not until you tell me what’s going on Al. Seriously. Is everything ok?”

Ashlyn sat on the stool and put her hands on her wife’s thighs. She was surprised when the brunette flinched and her head popped back up to look at her.

“Nothing’s going on, it’s nothing” she tried.

“Not buying it. Just save us some time and tell me what the problem is so we can fix it and then go have sex.” The keeper picked up one of Ali’s feet and started rubbing it. “You’re wound so tight you’re about to explode.”

Ali let out a loud, frustrated sigh and closed her eyes. Ashlyn’s hands felt so good, even just on her foot. She imagined how good they would feel on other parts of her body and felt her core twitch.

“Fuck it” she said matter-of-factly. “I can’t reach my legs to shave very well anymore and I can’t see to shave between my legs at all” she said quickly with a look of challenge on her face and a quirked eyebrow.

“And you won’t have sex with me because of that” Ashlyn finished the thought for her with the smallest smile on her lips.

“Pretty much” the brunette replied, almost defiantly.

“Ok so here’s what we’re going to do” Ashlyn reached for all of the clean baby clothes in her wife’s lap and dropped them into the crib next to them. She ushered Fred and Persey out of the nursery, closed the door and then walked back to her wife as she took off her sports bra and boxer briefs. “I’m going to make you come a couple of times and then I’m going to shave you so we won’t have this problem again.”

“Ash...”

“Don’t argue with me woman.” Ashlyn knelt on the front edge of the glider and gave her wife a deep kiss. “I’d shave you first but you’re so uptight that I don’t think that’s the smart thing to do right now” she chuckled. “One flinch and catastrophe” she teased, making the brunette giggle,
despite herself.

She leaned up and forward so that her breasts were right in Ali’s face, knowing she wouldn’t be able to resist. Once the brunette caved and put her hungry mouth around Ashlyn’s soft pink nipple she knew there was no going back. It only took a few seconds for her plan to work. She hissed in pain and pleasure as Ali sucked hard on her breast and bit down gently on her hardening nipple.

“Fuck Al.”

She let the brunette spend some time getting both of her breasts good and worked up, her nipples hard as rocks. Ali’s hands were all over her keeper’s soft skin, everywhere, too many places, too fast. Her breathing became labored very quickly and Ashlyn thought she might be having some sort of episode.

“Hey sexy” she purred as she pulled back away from the brunette. “Take it easy now, there’s no rush. Let me take care of you first.”

Ashlyn helped her scoot further down on the glider so her butt was right at the edge. She turned and moved the entire chair a few inches closer to the one twin bed they had kept in the room so Ali could prop her feet up on the edge of it and bend her knees. That way the rocker wouldn’t rock while they were getting busy. The keeper pulled her wife’s stretchy pants and underwear down her strong legs, once she lifted her hips for her, and knelt between them surprised at how wet Ali really was.

“Damn baby, you’re so fucking wet...and sexy as hell” Ashlyn husked out, her own desire spiking. “I can’t wait to taste you, but I think we need one big orgasm first, to take the edge off for you.”

Ali had her hands under her shirt, cupping her own breasts and starting to moan a little. She had pushed her bra up above her breasts so she could get to her stiffening nipples. Ashlyn didn’t waste any time at all. She moved her fingers through her wife’s soaked folds and then spread her lips open, exposing her inviting pussy. She pushed two fingers inside slowly, making sure there was still room for them inside her wife’s crowded body. Once she was sure about it she started to thrust at a medium pace as Ali began rubbing her own breasts and pinching her nipples. Her face was already flushed and her eyes were closed. There was no way this first orgasm would take more than a few minutes to achieve.

“Mmmmmmm baby, fuck you smell good” the keeper moaned out as she brought her mouth down to Ali’s clit.

She sucked and licked all around it, loving the way her wife’s body responded to the stimulation. Ali was bucking her hips up into Ashlyn’s face, trying to match the motions of her right hand buried deep inside her silky walls.

“Ashlyn...oh my God...”

All it took was a few strong flicks of the keeper’s tongue across Ali’s hard clit and she came undone in Ashlyn’s hands. The orgasm was strong and the brunette shook and jerked all through it. Ashlyn kept her fingers inside her, slowly pumping as she came down. She kissed all across Ali’s lower abdomen and the tops of her thighs, licking and sucking here and there as she went. She waited until the brunette’s breathing started to level out and then, once it did, she pulled her fingers out and replaced them with her mouth. She carefully sucked on all of Ali’s pussy lips, outer ones and inner ones. She moved slowly and deliberately, enjoying every single lick as she worked all around her wife’s entrance. It was still wet and getting wetter with every stroke of Ashlyn’s tongue.
“Ashlyn...” the brunette sighed out as she melted into the comfortable glider beneath her.

“Fuuuccckkk...”

“Mmmmmmm, Jesus... so damned good” the blonde moaned into wet folds and felt her own passion pooling between her legs. “Fucking delicious...”

She avoided Ali’s still too sensitive clit as she devoured her pussy. She drove her hungry tongue inside her wife’s hot center and reached as deep as she could, pressing her whole face into soft, sweet flesh. Ashlyn spent a long time with her head between Ali’s quivering legs, licking up every drop of passion the brunette spilled for her. The slow build up was driving Ali crazy. She didn’t think she could come again so soon after the first powerful, overdue orgasm, but as she tugged on long blonde hair between her legs she could feel the beginning of another one.

“Christ, what are you doing to me? Shit, babe...”

Ali felt like every part of her pulsing core was on fire, delicious heat building and building until she thought she might pass out. Ashlyn could feel the brunette’s walls starting to close in around her strong tongue. She wanted to look up into her beautiful face and see how dark her eyes were and how hungry her lips were but her large baby bump blocked her view. That’s alright. Ashlyn knew her girl was close and she hadn’t even touched her clit yet. The keeper dragged her tongue up to Ali’s sensitive nub and circled it a few times without touching it. She slid two fingers into her pussy, pumping slowly and evenly. She sucked all around the brunette’s clit before finally closing her lips around the whole thing and sucking even harder.

“Yessss” Ali writhed in the chair and started tugging on her own nipples again, still moving her hands beneath her shirt. “Unnnhhhh, yes babe, yes.”

The blonde increased her thrusting pace and felt the resistance of her wife’s walls, still closing in. She kept teasing her clit, moving her tongue across it and sending strong sensations through Ali’s whole body, but never quite hard enough or for long enough to get her off, yet.

“Ashlyn” she moaned, desperate for more direct contact on her sensitive nub. “Please, babe.”

The keeper had never been good at denying this woman anything. She got such genuine pleasure from making her happy and giving her what she needed and wanted every day of their lives together.

“Please Ash...”

Ashlyn pumped faster and harder with her fingers and then used her left hand to start rubbing Ali’s clit harder and faster at the same time. For the first time in a while she was able to look at her gorgeous wife’s face. Her head was back against the glider and cocked to one side just a bit. Her eyes were closed, her cheeks were flushed and her mouth was halfway open, lips moving and pursing and twitching as she responded to every single thrust and rub.

“Oh God, unnnhhhh, fuck, oh, mmmmmmm...” she bit her bottom lip and opened her eyes halfway just as her orgasm took over. “Ashlyn!!” she shouted as she came hard and sat up suddenly.

She was perfectly still for a few seconds, eyes locked on her wife’s, and then her muscles contracted and she fell back in the chair and shook for several minutes as she tried to breathe and not make too much noise.

“That’s it beautiful” Ashlyn encouraged as she moved her hands up and tried to hold her wife as best she could around the baby bump and the arms of the chair. “I’ve got you, sexy. I love you.”
It was almost thirty minutes later before Ali felt strong enough to get up and walk into their bedroom. She gave Ashlyn an orgasm and then tried to give her another one but her keeper insisted the brunette needed to eat something, besides her, before anything else could happen.

“Why don’t you get in the tub and I’ll bring your dinner up in a few minutes. Ok?” she kissed her pouting lips and got up to get dressed.

“I can come down and eat dinner” the brunette offered as she rolled towards the side of the bed and got ready to stand up.

“Maybe I want you to just stay naked all night for me. What about that?” Ashlyn quirked an eyebrow at her wife and then helped her up off the bed.

They hugged and kissed for a minute and then Ashlyn watched the brunette walk towards the bathroom.

“Quit staring at my ass” Ali teased, smirking over her shoulder as she got to the bathroom door.

“I will never ever stop staring at your beautiful ass, baby. And I’m not even sorry.” She followed her wife into the bathroom and started the bath for her while Ali peed. “Not too hot, remember?”

“I remember honey.”

“And be careful getting in, here, let me help you.”

Sometimes Ali found all of her wife’s overblown concern to be a little extra. But usually she found it sweet and endearing. It was nice to know she cared so much. And, even though it occasionally sounded like Ashlyn thought she was a helpless idiot, Ali knew her wife didn’t really think that.

After eating leftover chicken pot pie while Ashlyn shaved her legs for her Ali was ready to get out of the tub. She felt pruny and a little water logged.

“I swear I’m not trying to back out of it” Ali began with a sigh, “but can we finish shaving later? I’m done being in here. I just want to try and get comfy on the couch and watch a show with you and Whit. Is that ok?”

“That’s fine with me Al. I don’t care if we never do it, and not because I’m not perfectly happy to do it. Because...”

“You don’t care if I shave down there” Ali finished her sentence for her and smiled. “I know babe and I appreciate it. But I want to shave down there, for me. And I’d love your help. Just, not tonight.”

As they sat on the couch that night, enjoying the company of Whitney and the dogs, Ashlyn thought a lot about all of the things that her wife had been forced to let go over the past few months. They shared so much with each other and the keeper had always been happy to let her wife keep a few things private, just to herself. It didn’t seem like a lot to ask. But now, one by one, those things were disappearing. Ali had to let the blonde help her shave and help her with her hemorrhoids. It just didn’t seem fair. There was nothing Ashlyn could do about it and telling the brunette that she understood the sacrifices she was making didn’t seem like the right thing to do in that moment either. The last thing Ali would want that night would be to talk about it some more. The blonde would have to find the right time to thank her wife for giving up so much for the baby, for their family.
The Breakers training camp started the second week of March, as always. The team had changed a bit over the past three years, but the core group had remained the same. That core group was strong as hell and made up of older vets, younger vets and some flat out youngsters still. The way it was built, the team could be successful for many years to come as long as the GM kept drafting and acquiring the right kinds of players to fill in around that core group. Whitney was voted team captain again. Ashlyn kept her starting spot, despite some tough competition from young Abby Smith. She wasn’t even that young anymore – 2019 would be her fourth season with the Breakers who had drafted her as a rookie back in 2016. She had been called up to the national team during the off-season and was getting a long look by the USWNT coaching staff. She hadn’t been capped yet, but it was just a matter of time. The next step with the Breakers, and Ashlyn knew it before the coach ever called her in to his office to tell her about it, was for Abby Smith to start some games for the Breakers during the NWSL season. His plan was for Ashlyn to start three out of four games to begin the season. If Abby did well then they would re-evaluate. If Abby did poorly then they would stop starting her. He told his star goalkeeper that he expected nothing but the very best from her, as usual, and he assured her that she still had his complete confidence.

The other players that were official national team players were Rose Lavelle and Megan Oyster. Morgan Andrews had also been called up to two camps so far but had not received her first cap either. Everyone was excited about three things that season. The new soccer stadium was at the very top of the list, but the Women’s World Cup that summer was a very close second. And, finally, they wanted to repeat as league champions and they wanted to win the Supporters Shield for having the best record for the regular season and finish top of the table. The Women’s World Cup was being held in France during the month of June. The NWSL was taking almost the whole month off while the USWNT and so many of their international players were participating for their countries. The Breakers new stadium was a dream come true for the team and the city, really. Boston could now host some world-class soccer events whenever they wanted to. The stadium would be hosting the NWSL Championship week and game next season, in 2020, and although nobody would admit to it, every Breakers player and coach was dreaming about winning the championship in their home stadium.

The NE Revolution had their home opener the first week of March and the whole Breakers team went to support their male counterparts. They took the pitch at halftime and Ashlyn spoke to the sold-out crowd and asked them to come back the following month and help them sell out their home opener. She got a great reception from the crowd and was hounded all game long for autographs and selfies. She did her best to accommodate as many fans as she could, as always. It was a great night for Boston sports in general and many local sports celebrities came to the game to show their support. There were a lot of Patriots players there and several Boston Bruins and Red Sox too. Almost all of the Patriots, Bruins and Red Sox players from foreign countries were excited that their team’s city was finally starting to embrace the beautiful game. The Celtics had a game that night so they couldn’t be there but they sent a video congratulating Mr. Kraft and the Revs and Breakers on their beautiful new home. All in all it was a pretty sweet home opener for the new stadium.

Ashlyn hated to leave Ali when the team made their annual visit to Jacksonville for the second half of training camp. She tried to talk her wife into coming with her and the brunette had been truly tempted. But she was still struggling to find suitable office space for Knight-Harris and felt like she needed to be local in case something great became available. The keeper knew she was right but she still worried. She talked with both Sydney and Ken about keeping an eye on her while she was out of town for nine days at the end of March. And Ali made sure to schedule her ob/gyn
appointments for when the blonde was in town. Now that she was seven months pregnant she had to go see the doctor twice a month for the 7th and 8th months. Then, once she moved into her 9th month she would go every week.

April continued to be a hectic month for the couple. It was the same three events that always seemed to be tough for them to schedule, the Boston Marathon, Easter and Ashlyn’s home opener. This year, thankfully, Easter was the day after the home opener and they were both happening the weekend after the marathon. For the first time ever, Ashlyn was able to go with Ali to volunteer at her favorite spot, one mile in on the race course. When the Breakers’ schedule came out it was the first thing she had checked and she happily asked her wife if she and Whitney could join her volunteer group. There was some heated debate about whether or not the 8-months pregnant woman should be volunteering at all that year. Sydney, surprisingly, sided with Ashlyn and thought Ali should sit that year out. As excited as the keeper was to finally be able to join her wife at one of her favorite days of the year, she was even more concerned about the baby and Ali’s comfort and well-being. Whitney agreed with Ali and thought it was silly for her not to go. They weren’t going hiking in some remote part of the world. She argued that there were more EMTs where they were going that morning than anyplace else in the whole state of Massachusetts. The compromise was a folding chair. Ashlyn would carry a folding chair and Ali would sit in it when she needed to get off of her feet. And the keeper would do all of her wife’s walking around and picking up of discarded clothing. Done deal.

“I can’t believe I’m finally here with you for this” Ashlyn said quietly as she hugged her wife from behind early that Monday morning. “I’ll never forget the way you talked about volunteering, and this particular spot, the very first time we talked.”

It was 8:45am and they were waiting for the first wave of runners to start the race. All the usual suspects were there with them, Carm, Jessie, Liz, Erica, Heather, Sydney and Whitney. It was cool but not too chilly and they knew it would warm up once the sun worked its’ way through some of the low cloud cover in a couple of hours. Ali put her hands on top of her keeper’s, over their baby, and leaned her head back against her shoulder with a blissful smile on her face.

“That afternoon felt like a dream” the brunette chuckled through her smile. “I was so close to saying no when you asked me to stay and eat something after we measured those windows.”

“Really?” the keeper asked in surprise. “I thought you were just playing hard to get.”

“No” Ali shook her head. “I had one foot out the door and, I don’t know, something just made me close my eyes and jump instead.” She turned her head towards her wife and nuzzled into her neck. “I had no idea how many times I would do that with you over the next four years, take that leap of faith, but I’ve never regretted a single one.”

“Like when?” Ashlyn asked, genuinely wanting to understand what the brunette was trying to say.

“Oh, just every time I told you a secret that first year we were getting to know each other. I don’t tell people those things. Ever. I mean, most of these girls here” she nodded at the rest of their group, “have known me a lot longer than you and they don’t know any of those things I shared with you. And we’d only known each other a few months.”

“Yeah, that was such a strange, but awesome, feeling” the keeper agreed. “It just felt safe to tell you my secrets. Like, I don’t know, like I knew you would protect them, and me.”

“Yes, exactly. You made me feel safe with you and I’ve never felt that way with anybody before, well besides Syd and my family.”
“So that was the first year, what other times did I make you jump into something scary?” Ashlyn frowned as she tried to imagine what her wife could possibly answer because she couldn’t think of anything that fit the criteria.

“Oh man, I mean, tons of times” Ali squeezed her forearms and smiled again as she looked forward towards the race course. “I guess you didn’t realize what a chicken I was about being in a relationship and letting someone get close to me again.” She chuckled. “I’m sorry I brought it up. Let’s just pretend I was as confident as you thought I was.”

“You did seem confident though” Ashlyn leaned down and kissed the side of her head. “Except about moving in, that was when I realized how hard a lot of things had probably been for you.”

“Yeah, I revealed my true, terrified self there for a while. Thank God you didn’t give up on me.”

“Never.”

Ali turned in her wife’s arms and embraced her, kissing her lips softly. They hugged again and she whispered into the blonde’s ear.

“Pretty much everything we’ve done in bed involved me being scared at first and then just trusting you and saying ‘fuck it’.” She pressed a kiss behind Ashlyn’s ear. “And you’ve never let me down. You always catch me when I jump.”

“And I always will baby.”

The Breakers’ home opener was that Saturday afternoon and they beat the Seattle Reign in a high-scoring game. Ashlyn wasn’t happy about the four goals she let past her but only one of them had really been her fault. Angela Salem was still working her way back from a high-ankle sprain that she had suffered at the beginning of training camp and the communication between the holding midfielder taking her spot and the backline wasn’t great yet. The stadium was sold out and the city was in a soccer frenzy. The team had done everything it could to sell out the stadium. They gave dozens of tickets away for fan promotions and they had several local women’s college and high school teams come and fill as many seats as possible. Steven Dudley and his family were there and Ali spent quite a bit of time chatting with her former employer. They made a date to have lunch in the next few weeks and really get caught up. Ashlyn called in all her favors too, although Bob Kraft had already made sure a strong contingent of NE Rev and NE Patriot players were in attendance. He joined his Patriots players on the pitch for the pre-game and brought all five of the Super Bowl trophies with him. Tom Brady brought his whole family and they all kicked a soccer ball around near their pitchside seats before the game. Julian Edelman, Danny Amendola, Rob Gronkowski and the hot, new running back that had broken all kinds of scoring records the last season came and brought the house down with a pretty impressive juggling display. Now that there was a centralized outlet for them, the hidden soccer fans of Boston were crawling out of the woodwork. And the Breakers rewarded them. They started fast that year, sitting atop the table at the end of May with a record of 7-0-1. They knew they had a great team that season and they wanted to repeat and defend their championship title from the year before. Coach had been true to his word, for the most part, about platooning his two talented goalkeepers. Instead of Ashlyn getting three games to Abby Smith’s one, it was more like Ashlyn got two games and Abby got one. Although one of the starts was a game two days after the baby was born that May that the blonde had been scheduled to start. The only draw they suffered during the first two months of the season came against North Carolina and it was one of Abby’s games. She would never say it out loud to another living soul but Ashlyn was happy about that little stat.
Easter was always a nicer time than Ali expected it to be. She wasn’t sure why she had such low expectations for it. It was even more fun with little Cash running around. Ken and Vicki hosted and instead of waiting until the bulk of the holiday was over and then getting together with Ali afterwards, Sydney, Dom, Cash and Sandi just started coming to some family events with the rest of the family. Ali thought maybe it had taken Vicki some time to feel comfortable around Sandi or Sydney, or both. Cash was such a beautiful and fun little guy that it was always great to have him around. Ashlyn and Whitney hid about twenty eggs around Ken’s backyard and they all laughed and took pictures while the nineteen-month old meandered around trying to find them. The grown-ups had to make sure Persey and Fred and Boss left the eggs alone long enough for Cash to find them. Ali and Ken and Vicki sat on the deck, bundled up against the chilly 50-degree day, laughing and talking. Apollo lay at Ken’s feet with his doggie coat on for warmth.

“Have you heard from your brother?” Vicki asked as they watched Cash try to drop an egg into the basket that Sydney held out for him and miss by a mile.

“Yeah, he sent me a picture of the two of them this morning with their poached eggs at breakfast” she rolled her eyes and giggled. “Dorks.”

Kyle and Nathan had gone on a romantic vacation to a couples-only gay resort in Tahiti and were having the time of their lives. It was one of those places where you stayed in your own ‘hut’ right out on the water. The word ‘hut’ doesn’t usually mean gorgeous and luxurious suite, but at their resort it sure did.

“I think this one’s serious” Ken commented quietly, nodding his head as if he had given it extra thought.

“It’s been a year, I think that’s what they’re celebrating” Vicki added. “Do you think one of them’s going to propose?” she asked with excitement in her voice.

“Wouldn’t that be the best?!” Ali agreed, just as excited as her step-mother. “I don’t know though. I mean, Kyle hasn’t said anything to me about proposing. But who knows.”

They were quiet for a few minutes, enjoying the shenanigans in the backyard and thinking about how happy Kyle had been for the past twelve months.

“How are the childbirth classes going?” Ken asked and gave his full attention to his daughter, sitting next to him. “You only have a few left, right?”

“Two more, tomorrow night and then next Monday” Ali answered and laughed as Ashlyn fell on her butt trying to get an egg out of Fred’s mouth. “They don’t understand” she yelled to her wife who was getting frustrated. “They think it’s a game for them too.”

“Has Ash been able to get to all of them?” Vicki inquired. “I know it’s a busy month for her.”

“Oh yes. Non-negotiable. We picked the class on purpose so she wouldn’t have any conflicts. Five Monday nights in a row, from 7-9pm. The biggest challenge is me staying awake” Ali grinned. “She wants to be there. She wants to know everything” she chuckled. “That’s how she’s been from the start. The doctor tells her all the time how great it is that she’s so involved.”

“It is” Ken concurred. “Back when you were born they didn’t encourage us to be involved. It was all this big, mysterious secret. We were supposed to get our wives pregnant, get them to the hospital and then pass out cigars afterwards.” He shook his head sadly and patted Vicki’s knee. “I
think it’s so much better these days. Most men want to help their wives but don’t know how. The classes are a great way to teach them.”

“Well all I know is some of that stuff is just scary. Honestly, some of it... just don’t tell me. It’s too late anyway, I can’t change my mind. Don’t make me want to” Ali laughed, but she was only half-kidding.

“Right” Vicki agreed with a smile. “Sometimes the less you know, the better.”

“Where’s Koty today?” the brunette asked, just realizing her oldest step-brother hadn’t made an appearance yet.

“Off with this year’s girlfriend somewhere” Vicki sighed. “I was so happy when he decided to go to BC, thinking he’d be so close to home that I’d actually see him.” She laughed and squeezed Ken’s bicep as she leaned against him. “Boy were you right” she said to her husband, remembering the few times she had seen her oldest son in the two years he had been in college.

“I’ve been through it before” he raised his eyebrows at Ali. “He’ll come home when everybody else has to go home – for the big holidays - and not until then. Unless he needs his laundry done. Then you’ll see him a couple of weekends a semester when he runs out of clean underwear.”

They all laughed together and Ali tried not to think about how much anguish her college years had caused her parents. Cash’s cry cut across the backyard and everyone stopped what they were doing to see what the matter was. He was on his belly on the grass, red-faced and screaming. Sydney, Sandi and Dom were about twenty feet away looking at some of the pictures Dom had taken so far that afternoon. Tanner was throwing a ball for Persey on the other side of the yard and Whitney and Ashlyn were trying to keep Fred and Boss away from the eggs while Cash collected the last few. There was nothing anywhere near the little boy so he must have just slipped or tripped and fallen. Ashlyn was at his side in a few long strides, before anybody else had even moved. She picked him up and held him against her chest as he wailed. She leaned her head back to get a look at him and then started walking quickly towards the house, rubbing his back and cooing in his ear. Her voice was calm and soothing as she tried to settle Cash down but Ali could see the urgency in her wife’s eyes.

“He’s hurt” Ali said and started to stand.

“I’ll get the first aid kit” Vicki called out as she ran inside the house.

Ashlyn was coming up the deck stairs and, now that they were closer, Ali could see the blood on Cash’s chin and Ashlyn’s shoulder. Sydney, Dom and Sandi were running across the yard with varying looks of panic on their faces.

“He cut his lip but I can’t see how bad yet” the keeper said in a calm voice to Ali as she walked past her into the house.

Ali passed the info along to his parents as they finally caught up and ran after the blonde into the house. Twenty minutes later, Whitney and Ali stood out of the way, on the other side of the kitchen island, watching as Ashlyn held the frightened little boy. His back was to her chest and Dom had stepped in and cleaned his son’s chin off enough so he could see that it was just a small cut and nothing to get too worried about. Sydney and Sandi tried to entertain Cash and distract him while Dom worked to stop the bleeding. Ali’s heart surged when Cash took a big gulping breath, sighed, and leaned his head back against Ashlyn’s chest. The blonde kissed the top of his head and spoke quietly to him while his father finished up.
“She’s going to be such a great mom” Ali said softly, almost to herself.

“She really is” Whitney agreed with a warm smile. “The best.”

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It had been three months since their honeymoon but it felt like no more than three weeks. The official due date was May 13th and that was just over two weeks away. April was a tough month to carve out some quality alone time for the couple but they were determined to make it happen. The Breakers had a home game the last Saturday afternoon in April and Abby Smith had gotten her first start of the season. She hadn’t played that well but they still managed to beat Minnesota anyway. Ali and Sydney had gone to the game and out to the bar with the team afterward. But Ashlyn didn’t stay long. She had already explained to Whitney that they were going to disappear all day Sunday, just so she wouldn’t worry.

“Thanks for letting me know, I’m sure I would have noticed eventually” Whitney laughed as they carried the round of shots over to the team at the bar. “Um, do you need me to go crash someplace else?” she asked awkwardly.

“No, God no” Ashlyn chuckled. “It’s not like that” she lied a little. “We haven’t been able to take a weekend away with the baby coming, we just want to take a day all to ourselves and just...be together. That’s all.” She tried to explain their bubble day to her best friend and felt a little silly doing it. “Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No, I’m glad you told me. Seriously. I get it. Ryan and I do that too sometimes. We just hide out for a day or two, just the two of us. We don’t answer the phone, we don’t cook, we don’t go out, we just sort of connect. It’s hard to describe” she grinned sheepishly at the keeper.

“You said it perfectly.”

Ashlyn and Ali left the bar shortly thereafter and started their bubble time at the big old house. It would be their last kid-free alone time, ever, and they both felt the weight of the moment.

“I can’t believe we’re going to have a baby in two weeks” Ashlyn spooned her wife from behind and kissed her neck. She had just given Ali her second orgasm of the night and was holding her as she recovered. “It just doesn’t seem real, still.”

“So, that’s it for the sex then?” Ali asked, still a little breathless, and sounding annoyed.

“Huh?” the keeper sat up and leaned over the brunette to try and see her face. “Oh, right, I forgot. Sorry.”

They were quiet for a few minutes. Ali trying to catch her breath and Ashlyn rubbing small circles into her wife’s sore lower back. She kept rubbing, knowing that it was always sore at the end of the day after carrying around thirty pounds of baby. The keeper’s strong fingers moved lower and she gave Ali’s ass a sweet kiss on the way to her legs. She rubbed every inch of her thighs and calves and her swollen feet too. Ashlyn thought her wife had fallen asleep but as she worked her hands back up her tired legs the brunette carefully rolled over onto her other side, facing the middle of the bed.

“Ready for round three?” Ashlyn purred, hoping to get the mood back.

“No I’m ok” Ali gave her wife a tired smile. “Unless you need...”

“Nah, I’m still tingling from the first one” she winked at the brunette and continued massaging up
her legs. “I’m really sorry Al” she dropped her eyes and focused on what her hands were doing. “I’m just excited and I know it’s really hard for you to stay in the mood and I didn’t mean to ruin it. I’m sorry honey.”

“As long as we were both done then it’s not a problem. It’s ok babe.”

Starting a couple of weeks ago it had become difficult for Ali’s mind to stay focused on the sex she still really wanted to have. Her body had so much going on that it took a good bit of concentration on her part to block out things that reminded her that she was the size of a beached whale and growing a tiny human inside of her. It didn’t help matters when her swollen breasts leaked colostrum, the nutrient-rich early breast milk that she would feed the baby the first couple of days before her real breast milk came in, while Ashlyn sucked on them. The blonde had been sweet about it but it was definitely not sexy. And it was embarrassing as hell when she had gas and tooted while they were having sex. Ashlyn had just laughed it off but the brunette had been horrified. She still loved the whole pregnancy thing, but the closer the due date got the more her mind worried about every part of the big moment. They had both been pretty good about not actually discussing the baby while they had sex all throughout the pregnancy. It just wasn’t something that got either of them turned on. But Ashlyn’s excitement level grew along with the baby and, because her mind wasn’t concentrating on non-baby things during sex, she liked to talk about it. They had one big fight about it the first time it happened and Ashlyn had promised not to let it happen again. Ali felt like an ogre for making her wife feel bad about being excited about their baby. But she was nine months pregnant and she needed to have an orgasm and that wasn’t going to happen if Ashlyn kept talking about baby things while they were having sex.

“Help me up, I need to pee again.”

Their bubble day turned out to be pretty great after all. Ashlyn made them breakfast in bed and they just relaxed and held each other as much as possible all day long. The nursery was like a magnet for both of them so they threw some sweats on and spent a good portion of the day on the twin bed in there, laughing and talking and touching. They had moved the other twin bed downstairs and stored it in the basement. They kept Meg’s room set up mostly the way it had been, but put the new changing table in the place of one of the two dressers. They put the new crib along the interior wall next to the hall, where the head of the other twin bed had been. And they put the glider rocking chair and stool between the crib and the twin bed on the left side wall, in front of the window that looked towards the rear of the property. The glider was also one of the most comfortable places in the entire house for Ali to sit. They had a second one coming for the master bedroom. The keeper had repainted the nursery with clean yellow and green walls, muted and not too garish. Two green walls with yellow trim and two yellow walls with green trim. The artistic blonde had painted some of their favorite characters from the children’s books they had been reading to their baby for months on the walls. Ashlyn made a big deal out of involving Meg in the design and selection of the characters so the little girl wouldn’t feel like they stole her room from her. Ali had been on the Facetime call with them and explained that the room was really a nursery for babies and that now that Meg was bigger she would get to go to one of the other bedrooms. That did the trick. Meg had turned seven in March and was definitely not a baby anymore. She eagerly helped Ashlyn pick out who to paint on the walls and even suggested where to locate them. The two women looked around the beautiful room that bubble day and smiled at their surroundings.

“You’re going to be such a good mom.” Ashlyn held her wife as they sat on the bed, Ali’s back to her front. “I never doubted it for a second, but after the way you’ve handled your pregnancy Al, I just can’t tell you how much I appreciate everything you’ve done for our baby.” Her voice broke as her emotions got the better of her. “There’s no way I can ever thank you sweetheart. Nothing I can buy for you or give to you that would ever come close to measuring up.”
“Honey” Ali cooed as she shifted sideways so she could hug the woman she loved more than anything in the world. “What are you talking about? I love that we’re having a baby. I’m so happy.”

“I know you are, but I’ve watched everything that you’ve gone through, that your body’s gone through” Ashlyn paused and shook her head a little bit. “You’ve had to give up so much...”

“What, you mean like my dignity?” Ali chuckled and then gave her keeper a slow kiss. “I’ve gained a lot of perspective over these last nine months. Every time I start to feel sorry for myself because my back hurts or whatever the latest super attractive ailment is, I think about Syd. And if I compare this pregnancy to hers it’s a fucking cake walk.”

“Just because hers was worse doesn’t mean you haven’t gone through a lot too.”

“No, you’re right. But if the worst thing that happens to me is that I have to let you help me with my hemorrhoids then I’ll consider us lucky.”

After lunch they took a nice soak in the tub, careful not to get the water too hot. Ashlyn sat opposite her beautiful brunette and rubbed her feet under the fragrant water.

“I can’t believe Beth is pregnant again. Doesn’t it seem like they just had Johnny?” Ashlyn switched feet under the water. “But I guess he’s going to be two in a couple of months. Two years old. How the hell did that happen?”

Ali had been quiet since they got into the tub. The keeper thought she was just relaxing and unwinding.

“I’m scared Ash” her voice was small and barely audible.

“What honey?”

“What if I can’t do it?” she was pale and looked like she might throw up.

The keeper stared at her wife, unsure what to say. She remembered how frightened the brunette had been as they anxiously sat in the hospital waiting room for Sydney to give birth. Ali lifted her worried eyes and searched Ashlyn’s for an answer or some reassurance. Her bottom lip quivered and silent tears started to slide down her cheeks.

“Baby, I don’t know what happens if you can’t do it, because I’ve never doubted for a second that you can.”

It was the absolute truth and it was all the keeper could think of to say. They sat there and stared at each other in the tub as the water cooled around them. Ali sniffled a couple of times and then a tentative smile started to form on her beautiful face.

“Really?” she asked, her voice still a little unsure.

“Absolutely” the blonde replied definitively. “Al, I’ve never been more sure of anything in my whole life.”
Ali’s due date, May 13th, came and went and she did not go into labor. The Breakers had two away games to start the month and Ashlyn practically crawled out of her skin with worry while she was away. The team left Fridays at mid-day and the games were Saturdays at 4pm. Ashlyn and Whitney came home Sundays around lunch time, depending on when the return flights were. It was roughly forty-eight hours of agony for the blonde. They had a FIFA break the week the baby was supposed to be born. That was an entire week of nerve-wracking waiting. Dr. Comello held Ashlyn back for a minute as she and Ali were leaving the examination room after their weekly appointment. She made an excuse about needing her help with something on a high shelf.

“You cannot add to her stress.” The kind doctor’s words were short, sharp and direct. “Do you understand?”

Ashlyn nodded, her eyes wide.

“You are a worrier by nature and this baby not coming on time is only going to exacerbate the situation. She’s already tense to begin with.” She paused and looked over the keeper’s shoulder to make sure their conversation was still private. “You need to keep her mind off of the baby. You distract her. You entertain her. You keep her positive and upbeat. Take her on short daytrips, but not too far. Give her some sort of task that will keep her busy. You need to be strong for her now. Got it?”

Ashlyn nodded again and swallowed hard. Patty smiled at her and chucked her shoulder.

“You’re both going to do great. Try not to worry.”

The Breakers had a home game the next night, the week after the FIFA break, and Abby got the start. Wednesday, May 22nd and still no baby. They flew to Orlando for the next game on Saturday. The only way Ashlyn agreed to leave the state was when Dr. Comello told her that the chances that Ali would deliver the baby before the keeper made it home were very slim. Even if she went into labor Saturday while Ashlyn was in Orlando, she probably wouldn’t deliver before the blonde made it home. Most first time mothers had longer labors. Poor Whitney. She had to deal with the high-strung keeper on that away trip and it was not easy.

But, much like she had been in the days before her wedding, Ali was freakishly calm about not going into labor as scheduled. Sydney and Cash stayed with the brunette while Ashlyn was in Orlando and the coach couldn’t tell if she was really doing ok or if she was just in some sort of denial.

“You know the baby’s still coming, right?” Sydney teased as they settled into bed that Saturday night. “Just because he’s late doesn’t mean you get out of delivery.”

Ali smacked her best friend on the arm and rolled her eyes as she got under the covers and turned
onto her right side to start the night.

“Yeah Syd, I get it.”

“Ok, just checking” Sydney chuckled and turned the light off on Ashlyn’s nightstand.

She rolled onto her left side and faced the brunette as they lay there in the dark. Ali had already asked the coach everything she could possibly think of about what labor and delivery had felt like. She wanted to know the truth about what happened and how long things took and how much things hurt. And, as always, Sydney had been brutally honest with her. That night, as they waited for sleep to come, the coach could see the fear behind her best friend’s eyes. But she also saw the strength and determination there too. It was the closest thing she had seen to Ali’s game face since she had stopped playing competitive soccer.

“As terrified as I am of actually going through with it” she began in a soft voice. “I just want him here. I want to meet him and hold him. I want to be done with this part and move on to the next. You know?”

“I do know boo. And you’re ready. I can see it in your eyes. I don’t know when it’s going to start and I’m not sure how long it’s going to take. But you’re going to crush it. So just remember that. Keep that knowledge in your head and your heart the whole time and believe in yourself and you’ll be just fine. I promise.”

“Thanks boo. I will. I love you.”

“Love you too Alibaba.”

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During the FIFA off-week in the middle of May, the Knight-Harris Company moved into their new office space in Cambridge. All of Ali’s hard work had paid off and she had found, with the help of her old developer customer, a medium-sized, free-standing office building that had just been finishing construction in early April. They took the risk and bought it. There was a little bit of land behind it that they would use for a parking lot for now, but if they needed to expand the building in the future they could always re-purpose that land later. It was four floors high and had more than enough room for what they wanted to do. Ali enlisted Sarah’s help to make sure it had been designed and constructed correctly. And then she had the architect help her make a few changes before the construction was completed. The timing of it couldn’t have been more perfect. The work was done by the end of April and the young company was ready to move in on Monday May 13th. Back in April when they planned the move, Ali knew that her due date was the same as their move-in date but she felt it was more important to make the move during a quiet week in the NWSL, even if it meant she might not be there to supervise it. She felt it would be less disruptive to their athletes. As it turned out, it was an even better decision because both she and Ashlyn were around that week to help with the move.

The building was located in East Cambridge, very close to Kendall Square and the Museum of Science and the Charles River. The TD Garden, home of the Bruins and the Celtics, was just across the river in Boston. You could walk to the Cambridgeside Galleria, the local shopping mall, and there were two very upscale restaurants nearby, closer to the river. There were several high-end condo buildings along the river too, hence the fancy restaurants. You could also walk to Kendall Square which used to be famous for being the home of MIT. In the last ten years it had boomed into one of the hottest spots in Cambridge. They were close enough so that the land and building had cost more than they were really worth, but not so close that it was crazy expensive either. Kendall Square would never be as cool as Harvard Square, but it was giving the other big
Cambridge squares a run for their money. Their new building was close to two different subway lines, the red line and the green line, and only a quick five-minute drive to the major highways. The airport was an easy drive or cab ride too. In short, it was fucking perfect. The new soccer stadium was on the west edge of Cambridge and their new offices were on the opposite east edge and that seemed, somehow, exactly the way it should be. All of Cambridge was spread out between them.

It had been expensive and it was more building than they truly needed at the time. The long, rectangular building was a handsome red brick exterior with large, fixed glass windows. The length of the building abutted the sidewalk, and the front entrance, right in the middle of the expanse, was a tasteful steel canopy with the company’s signage mounted on top of it. The first floor was not brick, but a cool grey concrete that was designed to look like marble. There were matching concrete details at the roof, including a three-foot parapet with a decorative cornice, as well as an exaggerated crown dentil molding between the third and fourth floors to give it some architectural style. The windows had heavy lintels above them that matched the sills below them, all in the same grey concrete. They would have bought the building even if it wasn’t attractive, but both Ashlyn and Ali genuinely liked the way it looked. It had been designed and built to blend in with several other buildings in the area and it did just that.

The brunette made her pitch to the shareholders: Ashlyn, Hilary, Jared and herself, and they agreed that even though it would hurt financially in the immediate short term, it was a great investment that would ultimately save and then earn them money over time. Any prospective client, or new agent they were trying to hire, would be impressed by the professional space. The brunette was just happy to have the important task completed and off of her plate. Knight-Harris had officially arrived.

Ashlyn’s sponsorships continued to flourish as well. Her face was plastered all over Boston and Cambridge as Bob Kraft promoted the new stadium. She did a bunch of tv commercials with different players from the Revs and the Patriots. Nike had filmed a new ad campaign and highlighted both she and Hilary for their women’s wear line again. It hadn’t been as dramatic as the previous commercial shoot from two years before, but it was still a huge deal and very popular. The NWSL continued to use her as their representative for the non-USWNT players in the league. She was their poster child for everybody but those national team players. Her national presence was growing too. A big-name bank had signed her to a very lucrative contract. The success of her national supermarket campaign had led directly to this new national sponsor and Ali was pumped that her work had paid off again.

Ashlyn’s clothing line had been more popular than ever and she had started to figure out what people were willing to pay for and what they liked. Of course, being an artist, she sometimes wasn’t willing to change her ‘art’ just to please the masses. She and Ali and Jared had frank discussions from time to time about what sold and what didn’t. They never stopped Ashlyn from printing and selling any of her designs, but they did limit the quantity that was produced on some of the things that hadn’t sold well in the past. Whether you loved her style or you hated it, Ashlyn Harris’ t-shirt designs were a known entity in the women’s soccer world as well as the Boston sports market. K-H was going to have to hire somebody just to handle all of the merchandising needs of the company next. Sometimes, when they had just gotten into bed at night, Ali and Ashlyn would stare at each other in disbelief thinking about the success of their not-so-little company.

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Late Sunday morning Whitney and Ashlyn arrived at the big old house, home from their road trip to Orlando. The keeper was so relieved to see for herself that Ali was doing just fine that she had a hard time not bursting into tears. Dr. Comello’s words echoed in her head and she tried her best to
stay calm and steady for her wife. Poor Ali. She was so big and uncomfortable and hot and there
was nothing anyone could do to fix the real cause of the problem. All they could do was try to
alleviate some of the side-effects. Sydney and Cash stayed for most of the day which was great
because it gave the brunette an adorable little boy to focus on for several hours. Everybody was
surprisingly relaxed that afternoon, including Ashlyn. They played Settlers of Catan and laughed
and talked. Ali wanted to stretch her legs so she and Whitney took the dogs for a walk while
Ashlyn and Sydney caught each other up on how they thought the brunette was really doing. About
forty minutes later the mudroom door opened and the two dog-walkers stood just inside the
kitchen, still holding the leashes and looking a little wild-eyed.

“What’s with the faces” Sydney asked as she scrutinized her best friend. “And why are your shorts
wet?” It only took the coach another second. “Holy shit, your water broke!”

Ashlyn had been in the fridge getting things out to grille for dinner and stood up so fast she hit her
head on the bottom of the freezer.

“When did your water break?”
“Are you having any contractions yet?”
“Do you want to go to the hospital now?”
“Are you sure your water broke?”

The questions from Ashlyn and Sydney came fast and furious as Ali and Whitney stood there
trying to take them all in.

“Hold up!” Whitney yelled, making both dogs look up at her. She looked at her watch. “Her water
broke 20 minutes ago, just about 4:30pm, and we turned around and came right back home” she
stated clearly. “She’s had one contraction” she looked questioningly at the brunette as she spoke
and continued after Ali nodded in agreement. “And it lasted about thirty seconds and it happened
ten minutes ago.”

Ashlyn had written everything down and was pushing buttons on her phone.

“I’m calling Dr. Comello” she said breathlessly.

“I’m going to go upstairs and change” Ali said slowly, “right after I pee.”

She handed the leash she was holding to Whitney and waddled to the first floor bathroom around
the corner. When she emerged ten minutes later her wife was standing outside the door waiting as
patiently as humanly possible.

“Hi” Ali chuckled as she took in the sight.

Ashlyn couldn’t control herself another second and gathered the brunette into a hug, careful not to
squeeze too hard. She kissed her cheek and then her lips as they separated, both grinning like fools.

“I can’t believe it’s finally happening” she breathed out with her eyebrows up to her hairline. “I
love you so much Ali...”

“I love you too honey” Ali ducked her head a little bit and looked up at her wife through her lashes.
“What did the doctor say?”

“Oh, right. She said you’re doing great. The walk was a great idea and to keep doing things like
that as long as you’re comfortable. When the contractions get to be about thirty minutes apart and
pretty regular then we should go in.”
“Ok, well I’ve only had the one so far...”

“Here, let’s get you upstairs and changed. Do you want to take a bath or a shower or...”

“Ash I’m ok” Ali smiled at her wife. “Why don’t you make sure the bag’s all set to go and the car’s ready and all of that stuff? Ok?”

“It’s ready baby” the keeper smiled sheepishly. “I check it every day, just in case.”

They spent five more hours at home as Ali’s body began Early Labor. Sydney had Dom come and take Cash home so she could stay with her bestie and try to keep her distracted during the next several frustrating hours. Whitney stayed with them the whole time too and both Ali and Ashlyn were glad for the company. They knew they’d have their own private, grueling labor time when they got to the hospital later. The contractions came hourly for the first three hours and then increased their frequency to every thirty minutes at about 9pm. The contractions were mild and never lasted longer than 30 or 40 seconds. Sydney told her best friend to try and get some sleep now, while she could, when she had the hour in between the contractions. The brunette napped off and on while Ashlyn rubbed her back and gave her gentle massages to her legs and arms and head and neck. Ali’s neck and shoulders were really tight and the keeper realized how nervous she was. They all hung out in the living room and started a new Netflix show to try and distract them all. Both Ali and Ashlyn called their parents and their brothers to give them the update. It was Memorial Day Weekend and the next day was Memorial Day. The Breakers had been given the day off because they were playing their third game in eight days on Wednesday night. Whitney called their coach and let him know what was happening and that Ashlyn probably wouldn’t be at Tuesday’s training or Wednesday’s game. The gruff Brit was unusually emotional and told his captain to take care of their keeper for him. Ashlyn was moved to tears when Whitney recounted the call for her.

The birthing suite at the hospital they checked into just after 10pm that night was really nice. The logistics of birthing babies had evolved so much over the years that a lot of the older, more ancient methods that women had used were making their way back into common practice. For example, trying to push your baby out of your uterus while lying flat on your back was significantly more difficult than trying to do it while standing or squatting or kneeling or even sitting upright. Mother Nature and gravity had already worked out some tips and tricks for delivering moms and science just had to get out of the way a little bit sometimes. There was a hydrotherapy tub on the birthing floor that women in different stages of labor could use to help ease some of their discomfort and pain as they fought through the contractions. As soon as the baby was born the delivery team recommended skin to skin contact with the mother right away. And if you were going to breastfeed they recommended that you start right away, as long as both baby and mom were not in any distress.

Ali did indeed want to breastfeed. She also wanted to give birth without an epidural or too many other drugs. She knew there was a good chance she would regret it, but she didn’t want to have her baby’s birth masked by drugs. She was also deathly afraid of having an episiotomy. She would do almost anything to avoid that if she could. Sometimes during the hardest part of the birthing process, when the baby’s head was trying to pass through the vaginal opening, you would get a rip or a tear in the vaginal opening. To avoid those tears the doctors started to do a cleaner incision at the bottom of the vaginal opening which helped the head pass through easier. Or, if there was something wrong during delivery and they had to go in and use forceps or something to assist the delivery, they would do an episiotomy so they could get in there. Sydney’s episiotomy didn’t heal well and took a long time and was painful for weeks after she gave birth. Ali did not want one. She had done tons of research and reading and she discussed her fears and wants with Dr. Comello who was nothing but supportive. Ali started doing more kegel exercises to try and strengthen her pelvic
floor muscles which would help her deliver the baby. Both Ali and Ashlyn had been doing kegels as part of their ben wa balls practice, never realizing the other benefits they were reaping. If they wanted to be able to hold bigger, heavier balls for longer periods of time then they had to strengthen those pelvic floor muscles. They laughed about it with each other after they left Patty’s office that day. Ali also started to do a massage to the area around her vaginal opening, the perineum in particular, between her vagina and her rectum, that would help increase blood flow and therefore elasticity to that area which would obviously help it stretch during childbirth. She even let Ashlyn help her with that as part of their morning and evening routine. The keeper had never been happier to be of assistance. Not only was she massaging one of her favorite places, but she was helping her wife achieve something, hopefully, that she really wanted. There had been a lot of research done that pointed to epidurals leading to more episiotomies. They weren’t positive why, but the disconnect between mom and what her body was trying to tell her was thought to be the culprit. Labor took as long as your body needed it to take. Period. There was no rushing it. And you needed to be able to feel what your body was telling you. Time to push. Time to rest. Time to pee. Time to cry. Time to push again. Most importantly, Ali communicated to Patty what she wanted and didn’t want. That meant during the delivery that if Patty told her to stop pushing she had to do everything possible not to push, no matter how strong her urge to push might be. And, likewise, if the brunette felt an urge to push she needed to tell Patty. It would be a team effort if they were to succeed and deliver the baby the way Ali wanted.

It was a long fucking night. The Early Labor lasted until Monday morning just before 8am. Ali dozed when she could but, mostly, it was an infuriatingly frustrating time for the brunette. She wanted to be done. She was eager to get to the hard part so she could just get it over with. It felt, in a weird way, like game days used to feel at Penn State. That agonizing wait for kick-off when you could do what you’d trained so hard to do. The constant stream of adrenaline that pulsed through your body all day that you had to learn to control so you didn’t waste it all before you really needed it. That was what it felt like to Ali that night. So when she finally entered the Active Labor stage at 8am she was both terrified and excited to get moving towards her ultimate goal again. Of course, Active Labor hurt like a motherfucker and was easily the most difficult thing she had ever done in her life. The pain she felt during the contractions made her extremely painful period cramps seem like child’s play. Those bad period cramps were a two on the pain scale from one to ten, with these contractions being about a twelve.

Ashlyn did everything she could to help. She used all the tricks and techniques they had learned in birthing class to help her wife breathe through the contractions and the pain. She had dozed off with the brunette when she could during the long hours of early labor, snapping to attention when another contraction started. And she was right by Ali’s side for the whole active labor too. She helped her walk around the room and up and down the hall. She guided her to the hydrotherapy tub and helped her get in and out, several times that Monday morning. She wiped her face and her neck and her sweaty chest. She made her as comfortable as possible and massaged any part of her aching body that Ali wanted. The blonde did her best to distract her wife too. They talked about anything and everything from what flowers to plant in the small flower garden by the side of the garage to which formation they thought would work best against Portland if they got to face them again in the Championship game that Fall. Ali went off on a tangent about decorating the interior of the new office space and rattled off a list of about fourteen things before she gave her wife a dirty look.

“You’re not writing any of this down. Come on Ash” she said harshly.

The keeper grabbed a pad of paper and wrote furiously for ten minutes as she ran back through the list in her head.

That was how most of the morning went, with contractions increasing in frequency and potency. Ali changed positions a lot and Dr. Comello had encouraged her to do so.
“I don’t care if you’re standing on your head. If it feels good for your body then do it.” She had patted Ali’s knee after her last check-in. “But don’t really stand on your head, you know what I mean though, right?”

The position that gave her the most comfort was being on all fours. Ashlyn got some extra pillows and Ali spent almost an hour on her hands and knees, panting and grunting and swearing through several contractions. She had the keeper rub her shoulders and back at the same time and it was the most comfortable she had been in hours. Her legs were cramping and she was cussing a blue streak in that room as the morning turned into early afternoon. The contractions lasted for about a minute each, which is a long-ass time when it’s pure pain, and came every five minutes or so. Finally her cervix was dilated enough so she could start pushing. It was finally time. Ali climbed back up onto the birthing bed and started out in an upright sitting position for the first few contractions. She pushed with all her might, two or three times during each contraction. After an hour of this she changed positions and tried squatting for a while. The incredibly strong contractions lasted 60-90 seconds each and Ali had little more than 30 seconds to a minute between them when it got down to the nitty gritty. At the end of her second hour of pushing she was exhausted. She went back to her original upright sitting position and Patty suggested that Ashlyn sit behind her and help support her physically as she pushed through to the end.

“You’re almost there kiddo” the doctor encouraged with a smile. “You’re doing great. Just stay strong for a little while longer and you’ll be able to meet your baby boy.”

Ali was drenched in sweat and tears and had already peed once while pushing. She knew it was common and nobody cared. The nurses cleaned it up and wiped her off like they’d been doing it all their lives, because that’s how common it was. The brunette also knew there was a pretty good chance that she was going to poop during the end of delivery too. Another dirty little secret that nobody talked about. Thank God for Sydney Rae Leroux Dwyer. Ali had been preparing herself for that distasteful possibility for a month now. She still prayed to God that it didn’t happen to her but she would just have to be ok with it if it did. Ashlyn settled onto the birthing bed behind her and got some instructions from Patty on where to put her hands and what to do. She felt her fatigued wife relax as their bodies touched and it made her tear up a little bit. The fact that, even under these extreme circumstances, Ali’s body still recognized hers and responded to it was pretty great.

“We got this baby” she said softly into Ali’s ear and kissed her sweaty neck.

The brunette didn’t have time to reply because another contraction started as soon as the keeper was in place. They sat together and pushed like that for forty-five more minutes. There was a mirror positioned so Ali could see what was going on between her legs. Another genius modern concept. She cried out loud when she finally saw the crown of her baby’s head poke out. But then sobbed when it slipped back inside at the end of the contraction.

“No, no, no...” she wailed.

She was too tired to spend much energy on words so she just cried. Patty could see how exhausted she was. It had been almost 24 hours since her water broke the afternoon before.

“Hey, Ali, look at me for a sec” the doctor instructed.

The brunette lifted her eyes to meet Patty’s smiling face.

“We’re going to take the next contraction off. Don’t push, no matter how much you want to ok? I think one more big push will do the trick and we’ll get his head, but I don’t want you to rip anything. Right?”
“Right” she replied weakly. “Stretch it.” Ali nodded and closed her eyes.

The next contraction came and as odd as it seemed, it was probably the hardest thing she had to do all day. Not push. Everything in her body was telling her to push but she trusted Patty. She knew this would happen at some point. She panted and breathed through the contraction and almost broke Ashlyn’s hand. The keeper hadn’t really thought about how bad that would be for the rest of her season, but at that point, if Ali needed to squeeze her hand that hard, then fuck it. She would deal with a broken hand if she had to.

“I love you honey, you can do it” she told her wife and kissed her shoulder as she rubbed her lower back and made her moan. “You got this. You’re so strong and I know you can do this.”

The next contraction came and Ali pushed harder than she thought she ever could. Ashlyn helped as much as she could, applying pressure to her lower back and encouraging her. Sure enough, she pooped a little bit during the first push. And just like they had handled the pee, the nurse whisked it away and wiped the brunette off without missing a beat. Then, during the second push, the baby’s head pushed all the way through and stayed out. Ali couldn’t believe what she was seeing and tears filled her eyes again. A nurse suctioned the mucus from his nose and mouth and then, after the third big push during that contraction, the rest of his tiny body slipped out into Dr. Comello’s steady hands. It was just after 5pm on Monday, May 27th.

“There he is!” Patty grinned. “Great job momma. What a great job you did.”

Ali slumped back against her wife and felt like she was going to pass out as she heard her baby boy cry for the first time. She was so relieved she was almost giddy. Ashlyn watched as the nurses cleaned the baby off and took some vital statistics.

“You did it baby” Ashlyn gasped into her wife’s ear as she held her and tenderly wiped the hair off of her forehead. “I’m so fucking proud of you. Thank you so much honey. I love you.”

Five minutes later they brought him over and placed him on Ali’s chest, skin to skin, covered with a blanket. The brunette was so tired she could barely hold him up so Ashlyn wrapped her arms around and underneath her wife’s arms to help. She was happy the back of the birthing bed was upright and close behind her because she had to lean back after Ali rested all of her weight against her. The baby’s little face was still red and scrunched up as he tried to adjust to his new world. The brunette leaned down and delicately kissed his head.

“Hi baby boy” she cooed. “It’s so nice to finally meet you. My sweet boy.”

He squawked and tried to move his head around. Ashlyn reached one hand over and patted the top of his head and then softly caressed his red cheek.

“We’re almost done Ali, just a couple more steps” Patty interrupted the peaceful scene.

The doctor tugged on the umbilical cord still coming out of the brunette and, after a couple more much less painful contractions and pushes, Ali delivered the placenta. A nurse came up and, after Dr. Comello clamped the cord in a couple of places, handed Ashlyn the scissors so she could officially cut the cord.

“Nice job Ashlyn” Patty complimented the beaming blonde.

After a few more minutes of work between Ali’s legs the doctor spoke again.

“Now is a good time to try breastfeeding if you feel up to it. The lactation specialist is here if you need help or if he has trouble getting the hang of latching on.”
“I can start right now?” Ali asked eagerly.

“You sure can. We’ll be moving you to your mother-baby room in a few minutes but you can stay right where you are for the ride” Patty grinned at the happy new mother. “And I don’t mean to sound pushy, but if somebody doesn’t get a picture of that” she nodded her head at the three of them bonding together for the first time, “it’s a crime.”

One of the nurses offered and Ashlyn told her where her phone was so she could snap a couple of quick pictures.

“Are we squishing you?” Ali asked her wife, just realizing how much weight she was supporting.

“No way. I wouldn’t mind staying like this forever” the keeper answered truthfully. “But how are you? Does this hurt your back?”

Ali chuckled. “I’m a wreck and everything hurts, but it’s not you honey.”

She moved her hospital gown even further down from her neck on her left side, exposing her enlarged breast. She moved the baby down and then took her other hand and pointed her nipple in the direction of his face as they had taught her in the breastfeeding class she had taken. The lactation specialist stood close by and watched, ready to help and teach and correct if necessary. Ali moved her son’s face closer to her breast, just next to the nipple, and when he felt her warm skin he pressed his face into her breast. He worked his way over towards the nipple, making sucking motions and sounds with his tiny mouth as he went.

“I’m supposed to let him find it, right?” she asked nervously, doubting herself for no reason.

“That’s right. You’re doing great” the specialist replied with a wink. “See, there he goes.”

The baby latched onto her nipple and started sucking like he was born to do. The specialist talked with them for several minutes about the importance of getting a good latch, making sure his mouth was open and his tongue forward before letting him latch, and finding a good position so they would both be comfortable because breastfeeding a newborn was a commitment. They fed every two to three hours and spent anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour at the breast. Everything the brunette had read about it said that timing the feedings was not the way to go about it. You should let the baby feed as long as he wanted. The more often the better for both baby and mother. But that meant that Ali wouldn’t get more than two or three hours of sleep for a long time. She was planning to pump as well so Ashlyn could feed the baby too, but for the first couple of weeks it would be all her nipples so he didn’t get confused.

It had taken nine hours of active labor but their beautiful baby boy had come into the world healthy and hungry and they couldn’t have asked for more than that. He was just over seven pounds and he had a thick tuft of dark hair on top of his head that made him look a little bit like a gnome. Ashlyn got a cross look from her wife the first time she said it but then Ali giggled and had to agree.

“Well he’s our little gnome and he’s perfect.”
“You’ve got some people who are dying to meet your cute baby boy if you’re up for company” the nurse said as she poked her head into their room just after 7:30pm. “They’re about to get kicked out because visiting hours end in twenty-five minutes. No pressure, just wanted to make sure you knew they were here.”

Neither woman had any idea what time it was or if it was still even Memorial Day. And they were both a mess but they didn’t care. Ashlyn grinned at her wife and waited for her decision. It was up to Ali and the blonde would do whatever she wanted.

“Sure, what the hell” she shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

“I can bring back two or three at a time...”

Whitney and Kyle stood around the chair Ashlyn was sitting in, right next to the bed where Ali was propped up. Sydney sat on the edge of the bed, close to her best friend. The baby was sleeping in the keeper’s arms, swaddled tightly, with a little tiny blue and white hat on his head. Whitney took her best friend’s phone and got Chris and Beth on Facetime as instructed. Ali spoke quietly so she wouldn’t wake the baby.

“I don’t know why I’m surprised you’re all here, and have been for most of the day” she got a little choked up and paused. “Of course you were. You guys are just the best and we both love you so much” she looked at her wife who nodded and grinned. “Deciding which of you wonderful people were going to be his godparents was almost as hard as giving birth” she chuckled. “Honestly, we want all of you to do it but we know we have to stick to some traditions.” She reached for Sydney’s hand, sitting next to her on the bed. “And because there’s no way to choose we just decided to go in order. So, if you accept, Chris and Beth we’d love for you to be his godparents.”

It was Chris’ turn to get choked up. “Geez, of course we accept” he answered after a quick look at his smiling wife. “We’d love to. Thank you guys so much” he paused again and cleared his throat. “This really means a lot.”

“So that means I’m next, right?” Sydney asked with a quirked eyebrow.

Ali giggled. “Yes boo, you and Dom are next.”

“So there’s definitely going to be a next?” Kyle asked with excitement in his voice. “How soon are we talking about. I’m trying to figure out how long I’m going to have to wait.” He winked at his sister and squeezed Ashlyn’s shoulder.

“After what I just saw her do” Ashlyn’s voice was quiet and serious as she spoke, “she can take all the time she wants before she does that again. That was no joke.” She shook her head and looked at her wife with pure admiration in her eyes. “Unbelievable.”

“What’s his name?” Whitney asked, unable to wait any longer.

“Aw man, my first failure as Godparent, not even asking his name” Chris joked from the phone in Whitney’s hand.
Everybody chuckled, still trying not to wake the baby.

“Oooh, does that mean I get him instead?” Sydney teased. “Did he just flunk out of the program or something?”

Just then the little baby squirmed and squawked and opened his eyes just the tiniest bit.

“Hi sweet boy” Ashlyn whispered to him and tilted him a little bit in her arms so he could see more of the room. “This is your crew, your family. They’re going to help us take care of you and help you grow up.”

“So what’s his name? What’s his name?” Kyle asked impatiently, bouncing on his toes and tapping the keeper on her shoulder.

“Everybody, meet Andrew Holatka Krieger. Drew, meet Aunt Sydney, Aunt Whitney, Uncle Kyle and in that little picture is Uncle Chris and Aunt Beth. They’re your godparents” Ashlyn showed the baby each person as she introduced them.

“Where did you get Andrew from” Sydney asked, looking at Ali and tilting her head. “That wasn’t on any of your lists.”

“No” Ali agreed. “It wasn’t. We couldn’t find the right name for a long time and then last week we were driving home from our doctor appointment, getting frustrated about it, and we walked into the house and there he was, staring at us on the mudroom wall.”

“Captain Andrew Leighton” Ashlyn said proudly. “When we learned about the house and him and what a great man he was we never thought about naming our son after him.”

“But the more we thought about it the more we loved the idea” the brunette continued. “The Captain was someone we both really admired – all the good things he did for his crewmen and for all of their widows and families, and the whole community really - and we both love the name. It was right in front of us all along and we just couldn’t see it.”

“And if he hadn’t built that house...” Ashlyn’s soaring emotions got the better of her and she stopped and smiled tearfully at her wife. “We might not...” but she couldn’t finish. She pressed her lips together into a tight line as she fought hard against her tears.

“Aww sweetheart” Ali choked out, getting emotional too.

“You guys are making me cry” Kyle added, his voice cracking.

“Oh please, like that’s hard” Sydney teased him through her own watery eyes, bringing some levity to the suddenly serious atmosphere in the room.

“And the Holatka” Chris commented through the phone after a minute. “That’s nice Bash. Gram would absolutely love that.”

“Thanks Bubba” Ashlyn smiled at her big brother as he wiped a tear from his face. She turned to the others to explain. “Holatka was Gram’s maiden name. It’s the part of the family we get our Native American blood from” she nodded at her brother.

“We really wanted to name the baby after Gram and, after we found out we were having a boy, that became a little bit more difficult” Ali laughed softly.

“I’ll bet” Kyle added with a grin.
Sydney and Whitney knew about the Holatka because both of their best friends had been asking them repeatedly since February for help finding a name that worked with it.

“Well hello Drew” Whitney smiled and leaned forward to touch the top of his head. “You are the cutest little Krieger I’ve ever seen.”

“Oh wait til you see this” Ashlyn giggled and pulled his little hat off. She fluffed his tuft of hair back up into its’ natural upright position and giggled again as everyone joined her. “Is that not the cutest thing ever?” she asked as her dimple popped out and she leaned down to kiss her son’s head.

“He looks like a gnome” Sydney said through a loud giggling snort and turned to look at her best friend, hoping she wasn’t too tired to take a joke. “I love it!” she laughed and was relieved to see Ali laughing too.

“Hey, you baby hogs” Vicki teased from the doorway. “They’re throwing us out but we’re not leaving until we see him.”

The first crew gave hugs and kisses and left the room so Vicki, Ken, Sandi and Nathan could come say hello.

“Look at all that hair” Sandi commented with a grin.

“That’s what you looked like” Ken said over his shoulder to Kyle as he was about to leave the room. “Big chunk of hair on top of your head, just like that” Ken smiled as he turned to look at his first grandchild. It only took a minute or two before he teared up. “I’m so proud of you princess” his voice was clipped as he tried to fight off the tears while he hugged his daughter.

“Thanks Dad” Ali replied just as emotionally. They held each other for longer than usual. “I love you.”

“I love you too baby girl.”

“Do you want to hold him Grandpa?” Ashlyn asked as she stood up so Ken could take her seat and hold the baby.

She moved over to the other side of her wife and put her arm around Ali’s shoulder, kissing her softly on the side of her head. They both watched Ken melt at the sight of his grandson. The man was usually so stoic but he cried more than a few tears as he smiled down at the infant in his arms. Kyle poked his head back into the room to tell everyone it was really time to go, but he stopped with his mouth open at the sight of his dad meeting the next generation of Kriegers for the first time. He looked quickly at his sister who gave him a heart bursting smile in return. Kyle took a couple of quick pictures and stood and watched for a few minutes longer before the nurse came in and made them all get out.

Once they were gone little Drew was hungry so he went back to Ali’s breast. The brunette made her wife come and sit next to her in the bed so she could be close by again. They decided they had better Facetime their moms and Mike Harris before it got too much later and they both passed out. Ashlyn hadn’t done any pushing or anything but she had gone for 29 hours without more than an hour sleep here and there. There was a cot set up in the room for her and they had both been encouraged to sleep when the baby slept. He would cry if he needed anything and the nurse would wake them every 2-1/2 hours so Ali could feed him.

“You look beautiful sweetheart” Deb said softly. “Tired, but so beautiful.”

“Thanks mom” Ali smiled back at her mother over the phone Ashlyn held out in front of them.
“Boy am I glad that’s over” she chuckled.

“I’ll bet. Ashlyn says you were a superstar, as usual” she beamed at her daughter. “I’m so proud of you Alex. There’s nothing on earth quite like what you just went through. It’s special and wonderful and a true miracle.”

“I still can’t believe it. I’m afraid if I go to sleep I’ll wake up and still be pregnant” she laughed softly and rolled her eyes.

“Did it all go the way you hoped? No episiotomy? No drugs?”

“Ugh, did I want drugs about halfway through” Ali moaned. “But I just kept thinking about Syd and how much I didn’t want that episiotomy. And Patty was great and everything went great and I only wanted to die of embarrassment a couple of times so no complaints.”

“Uh oh” Deb chuckled. “Did we have some bodily functions happening while we were pushing?” Her eyes twinkled with a mixture of mischief and pure love as she watched her daughter squirm over the tiny phone screen. “It’s ok honey, it happens more often than anybody ever admits. I promise you.”

“And now I want to die again, thanks mom” the tired brunette grumbled.

Deb oohed and aahed as Ashlyn moved the phone so she could see her grandson nursing.

“Oh it kills me that I’m not there right now” Deb whined. “But I’m coming baby boy. That’s right, Grandma’s coming to see you in three weeks my love.”

After they ended the call with Deb they made another quick one to Tammye, who was with Mike at Chris’ house so they were able to get all the grandparents done before the baby was done nursing from Ali’s other breast.

“So your mom picked ‘Grandma’? What happened to...?” Ashlyn asked as she took her son from Ali and coaxed a burp from him when he was done feeding.

“‘Noni’ was what she was leaning towards but apparently she changed her mind. It’s Italian. She used to call her grandmother that. We used it sometimes for my grandma but not all the time.” Ali said with a blink of her tired eyes.

“I like ‘Grandma’ just fine. I really don’t care what he calls any of them. I was just curious.”

Johnny called Tammye ‘Gigi’ because Beth’s mom was ‘Grandma’ to him. And he called Mike ‘Papa’. So those two names were already locked in for Drew. That left Grandma available for Deb and Grandpa available for Ken. They would figure out what to call Vicki and Carol and Mike Christopher some other time. Nobody was really worried about it.

The keeper kissed the baby and the nurse came in to take him for some bloodwork and a few more standard tests. She would bring him back in about an hour and told them to get some sleep. Ashlyn helped her wife to the bathroom and chuckled at the brunette’s outfit. Poor Ali still had just her hospital gown on, just loosely over her shoulders so she could breastfeed and get that skin to skin contact with the newborn. And she had a pair of loose, stretchy underwear the nurse had given her after they had finished up in the delivery room. She had to wear a big old sanitary pad because things kept coming out of her uterus as it started to slowly shrink back into shape. It would take several weeks for everything inside her to get back down to their normal size, and in the meantime, things kept draining. Another nice detail nobody had told her but Sydney.
“You had better not be laughing at me” Ali snapped as she carefully sat on the toilet and winced. She gripped the keeper’s arms tightly and squeezed hard until the pain subsided after a few seconds. She rested her head against Ashlyn’s stomach and they stayed like that for a few minutes while she peed. Everything hurt down there. Nothing had torn or ripped, thank God, but everything felt like it had just played a full 90 and gotten the shit kicked out of it. Ashlyn looked for the squirt bottle the nurse had shown them and got ready to hand it to her wife when she was finished. But the brunette wasn’t moving. Ashlyn had a flashback to when she took care of Ali the first time she had gotten so sick, and for a few seconds she was standing in Ali’s bathroom again, holding her up while she peed in her flu-afflicted stupor. God she loved this woman.

“Baby” the keeper said softly. “Are you done? We should get you back into bed so you can rest.”

After another minute of silence Ashlyn realized that Ali had fallen asleep. The blonde woke her up and made sure she had peed. She got her cleaned up with the spray bottle and then helped her back into bed, pulling the covers up and kissing her lips for the first time in what felt like years. Her eyes were already closed and she was out like a light.

“I love you so much Ali Krieger.”

The brunette whimpered a tiny bit and Ashlyn smiled. She crawled onto the cot that was about three feet away from the bed and passed out.

//

They stayed in the mother-baby room for three full days. There were perks to being the one who chose the insurance plan for your own company. Instead of the normal two-day hospital stay for having a baby, Ali’s insurance covered three days and they took full advantage. The room was designed for exactly what they were using it for. To have the newborn spend as much time with Ali as possible, and to provide a private space for the new parents to learn how to care for their new bundle of joy. There was the typical hospital bed and table and little closet, but there was also the cot and the bathroom that had a shower in it. There was a tv with basic cable and you were allowed to use any of your electronic devices whenever you wanted. It definitely wasn’t home, but for first-time parents, it was exactly what they needed. They learned how to swaddle him and bathe him and keep track of his dirty diapers and his wet diapers. And yes, there was an important difference. That was how you knew if he was actually getting enough nutrition from his breastfeeding or not. You had to chart the output and keep track of his weight every day. They started their breastfeeding log so they could do just that. In addition to keeping track of his stats and production, the chart helped Ali remember which breast she needed to nurse from next. It was important to keep alternating them and keep him feeding round the clock so her breasts didn’t become engorged and painful. The lactation specialist checked in every day to make sure things were still going well, but Drew was a natural and had no trouble getting a good latch more often than not. Every once in a while Ali had to put her finger in his mouth and make him start over because he wasn’t latched properly, but it was a pretty rare occurrence. They were both distraught when he was taken the next day to be circumcised. It had been something neither of them had thought much about before Sydney asked Ali, a few weeks earlier, whether or not they were going to have the procedure done.

“Oh my God, I hadn’t even thought about that. Yeah, I guess we will. I’ll have to talk with Ash, but I think so.” She paused and tried to think about what she knew about circumcision. The three penises she had spent time with in her life had all been circumcised. “It’s supposed to be better for them, right? Not as much as they used to think, but still, it’s easier to keep clean and the risk of problems goes down if you get it done, right?”

“Yep, pretty much. They used to just do it automatically and then they started to ask if it was really
The coach had done all the research before they had Cassius so she knew what she was talking about. “It’s absolutely not necessary, but it is still recommended.”

“Well if it’s not necessary...”

“I hear you” Sydney nodded knowingly and smiled at her best friend as they sat out on her screen porch one warm evening in early May. “But we decided to do it because most people still do it and we didn’t want Cash to be too different if he didn’t have to be. Especially with a part of the body that’s so tied to the sensitive male ego” she giggled. “Dom said when he was growing up the boys who weren’t circumcised were teased to death. That’s all I needed to hear.”

“Yeah, no sense making him a target for that if we don’t have to” Ali chewed her bottom lip as she thought more about it. “Especially when he’s already going to be the kid with two moms.” She rolled her eyes. “Can you imagine what the mean boys would say? ‘Oh your two moms don’t even know what to do with a penis, no wonder they didn’t know enough to get yours right’.”

Ashlyn had agreed after they talked about it, but that day as they waited in their little room for him to come back after the procedure, it seemed like a cruel thing to do to a two-day old baby. But the nurse said he had been a champ and then took a few minutes to show them how to take care of the tender surgical area. Dr. Comello had come by every day to check on her patients and make sure they had everything they needed. The morning after the delivery she had stopped in to talk to Ali about getting herself healed up as well.

“So how are you doing? I see the breastfeeding is going well and that’s great” she said as she patted the brunette’s leg. “Not all babies take to the breast right away and it can be really stressful and traumatic for the new momma.” The doctor looked at the baby sleeping in the bassinette next to the bed and smiled again. “But what about you?”

“Oh, well” Ali sighed and glanced at her wife before looking back at the doctor. “I’m doing ok I think. I don’t really know, I guess.”

“Do you want me to leave?” Ashlyn asked, suddenly realizing that her shy brunette might want some privacy with the doctor. “It’s ok if you do” she smiled softly.

“No” Ali blushed a little and reached for her keeper’s hand. “You may as well hear all the gory details too. You’re through the looking glass now” she chuckled and rolled her eyes.

Ashlyn took her hand and squeezed it as she stood next to the bed and helped her wife scoot down a bit so Patty could examine her. After a few minutes the doctor pulled the covers back up over Ali and took her gloves off.

“Things look good. Sore and swollen and there’s some bruising but nothing out of the ordinary for what you just went through” she explained.

“So it’s supposed to feel like a colony of fire ants has moved in everywhere down there?” Ali asked with a pained expression on her face. “How long does that last?”

Ashlyn wanted to die for her poor wife. It was so hard to watch her suffering. And her delivery had been one of the easier ones. The blonde couldn’t imagine what Sydney and so many other women had felt like after their more difficult experiences in the birthing room.

“Yes” Patty chuckled and patted Ali’s leg again. “Unfortunately, that’s exactly how it feels. There are some pretty neat tricks for soothing all of those things too. Some women put a bag of frozen peas into a Ziploc bag and sit on that. Some take one of these sanitary pads and soak it, then freeze
“It and use that. Then it soothes you at the same time it’s taking care of your discharge.”

“How long will I be bleeding?”

“Anywhere from three to ten days usually. It’ll be pretty heavy at first and then taper off. And you’ll feel some cramping too. This is all because your uterus is tightening up again and moving back where it belongs. The cramps can be pretty powerful for the first week but then they taper off too. The uterus should be done with all of that by the time you come see me for your 6 week postpartum check-up.”

“Thank you so much for helping me have the delivery I wanted Patty. I appreciate you putting up with me...”

“Now cut that out” the friendly doctor chastised. “That’s how it should be – the way you want. I’m glad it went so well too. And you deserve most of the credit my dear.”

They smiled at each other and then the baby chirped in his sleep and all three women turned their attention to the bassinette.

“Have you pooped yet?” Dr. Comello lowered her voice, knowing it was Ali’s least favorite topic.

“No.”

“Listen” Patty squeezed Ali’s leg and quirked her eyebrow at her. “It’s going to hurt and there’s nothing you can do about it so don’t make it worse by worrying about it. And whatever you do, don’t try not to go. That will only make it more difficult. Just do it and then it’ll get easier each time. Ok?” She waited for Ali to nod before continuing. “We’ve got some ointment we can get you...”

“I brought the Preparation-H” Ashlyn interrupted. “If that’s ok to use, we know that works.”

Both Ali and the doctor gave her surprised looks.

“What? I read the books too” she defended herself. “Although they kind of gloss over this part.”

“I don’t know where you found this one” Patty turned to Ali. “But you are a lucky lady.”

“I know” the brunette said shyly as she squeezed her keeper’s hand. “I know.”

On Wednesday night the Breakers were scheduled to play the Chicago RedStars at home. It would have been Ashlyn’s start but the decision to stay with her wife and baby was the easiest one she’d ever had to make. She would be taking them home to the big old house Thursday afternoon and missing the next game too. Saturday they were travelling to Sky Blue for their only game in June. The NWSL was taking almost the entire month of June off because of the World Cup in France. Thursday mid-morning, after beating Chicago the night before, the team came to the hospital to visit their keeper and meet her new son. Whitney had arranged it and made sure the nurses would be cool with it. They suggested meeting in a corner of the cafeteria so there would be more room and more privacy. Unless it was a peak dining hour, there were never more than a handful of people in there. The captain had told her teammates to be calm and quiet when they met the baby or she would have them running windsprints until they puked.

“Are you sure you’re ok walking this far baby?” the blonde asked as she accompanied her wife for another stroll around the halls of the hospital, carrying their baby son.

They hadn’t gone this far before and she wanted to make sure her over-achieving brunette wasn’t
over-doing it.

“I’m good Ash, I promise” Ali replied with a smile. “It feels good to stretch my legs. Come on.”

She had just fed her son and wanted to get to the cafeteria before he dozed off again. Whitney had clued her into the surprise and was happy when the brunette offered to help. Ali had graduated to wearing clothes that day too. Nice, comfy, loose sweats and a roomy nursing top had gotten Ashlyn’s attention that morning when they got dressed. The brunette honestly explained that she wanted to get used to doing everything the way she would at home before they left their little cocoon in the hospital. And that included wearing clothes instead of just a hospital gown. She made sure the keeper looked presentable too before they took their stroll to the cafeteria. She always looked good, but Ali knew there would be pictures taken and that her wife would be disappointed with them if she looked like she had just rolled out of bed. The two of them were so tired that they really weren’t sure which end was up all the time. Waking up every 2-1/2 hours for three days was not ideal for any human being. They just had to make it through two weeks. Then Ali could start pumping her breastmilk and Ashlyn could help with the feedings so they could alternate and take turns getting a good night’s sleep. Until then they would just do their best. Ali was normally not pleasant to be around if she was overtired. She got cranky. But, so far anyway, the joy of having their baby be the reason for her exhaustion counteracted any belligerent feelings about being woken up.

“Surprise!” the team whisper-shouted when Ali led her wife towards them at the back of the cafeteria.

“You guys!” Ashlyn grinned from ear to ear, dimple on full display. She looked at her best friend and nodded a simple thank you, getting a bright smile in return. “Thanks for coming to meet our boy.”

They were careful not to do anything to startle the 2-1/2 day old baby as Ashlyn held him. Whitney had already screened everybody to make sure there were no illnesses. They were athletes and, typically, pretty healthy because of their good nutrition, exercise and sleep habits. But everybody got sick sometimes. No sickies allowed during the visit. Newborns immune systems weren’t fully functioning until they were a few months old so you had to be really careful where you brought them until then. Ali and Ashlyn had talked with Dr. Comello about getting their own vaccines updated and made sure both Deb and Tammye did too. They were both coming to help during the first few months and no-one wanted to get the little baby sick. Whitney did the same thing, knowing she would be helping as much as her best friend would let her. She had never been happier to get a shot in her life.

Kristie Mewis presented Ali with Drew’s first Breakers jersey. A miniature keeper’s jersey with his mama’s #24 on it. The team also gave the new parents a gift card for a weekend away at a beachside resort up in Ogunquit, Maine. Whitney had asked Molly for help finding a good spot that both Ali and Ashlyn would enjoy. The team had missed the baby shower at the end of February because they hadn’t reported to NWSL duty yet. They wanted to make sure to take care of that now that the baby was born.

“This is too much you guys” Ashlyn raised her eyebrows as Ali held out the card and gift so she could read them. “You didn’t have to do that. Thank you very much. You’re too good to us.”

They talked for a few minutes about the baby and his adorable gnome hair and the story behind his name. Ashlyn congratulated them on their win the night before and complimented Abby Smith on her game and a couple of nice blocked shots. The blonde noticed Ali shifting her weight a little uncomfortably as she stood next to her.
“We should get you off your feet” she said quietly to the brunette.

Ali looked at the inflexible seats of the cafeteria chairs and swallowed hard.

“No, I’m ok for a little while longer.”

“Hey guys, I’m going to get these two back to their beds now.”

Everyone’s face fell. They knew it was going to be a quick visit but they hadn’t been around the blonde since their road trip five days earlier and they missed her. And she wasn’t going with them to New Jersey that weekend either.

“I’ll just take him back to the room” Ali said, understanding what was happening. “You stay here andvisit.”

“No Al, I’m not going to let you walk back by yourself...”

“I’ll walk them back” Whitney said definitively, stepping forward to take the baby. “You hang out and I’ll be back and then we’ll let you get back to being a new mom. Ok?” She asked as if it was a question but she already had little Drew in her arms and Ali was smiling at her gratefully so she knew it was a done deal.

“Thanks Whit” Ashlyn replied with a soft smile.

As they got to the door on the other side of the cafeteria, Ali turned to look back at her wife, sitting in the middle of her teammates talking animatedly about last night’s game. They all laughed and joked with each other and the brunette realized, for the first time, how hard it was going to be for her wife to ever give up playing professional soccer. She still had a few years, hopefully, so they could work their way up to that point. But Ali knew that was going to be a difficult time for her keeper and she dreaded it for the both of them. But that was a change to worry about for another day. Their entire lives had just changed and they had their hands full with their brand new son. And they could not have been happier.

Chapter End Notes

So tell me what you think of the name. I'm dying because nobody's commented anything yet. When I read other fanfics I sometimes cringe at the name of A/A's babies, more often than not truthfully. But, after a chapter or two, it starts to feel like the right name to me. I'm curious what you guys think about 'Drew'. Also - did it make sense to you for them to name him after the captain? I obviously think it made perfect sense, lol. But what did you think?
World Cup Whirlwind

The month of June was one that both women would look back on and wonder how they survived. They were sure they wouldn’t have without the help of their moms and other supportive friends and family. Ali was on official maternity leave and knew Jared and Marcy could keep everything running smoothly at Knight-Harris. And Jen, Paige and Jerry could take care of their clients without any worry either. The thing that suffered the most from having Ali absent was Ashlyn Harris, the brand. Ali was the one who focused on Ashlyn Harris, the brand. But if they could get through the first month and settle into some sort of routine with the newborn, then the brunette felt like she could still keep her hand in some of the business needs of her wife. She would never sacrifice the special time she was sharing with her baby, but her brain was still working and if she had a good idea about something to expand Ashlyn’s brand then she would act on it.

The keeper couldn’t believe her luck with the NWSL schedule that year. Instead of having to go right back to playing soccer and travelling for away games, she had the whole month off to spend with her wife and new baby. The Women’s World Cup was really the cause for the month off and Ashlyn couldn’t have been more relieved. They didn’t have a lot of say in when the baby would be born. They didn’t have too much control over when he was conceived either. The keeper just thanked God and Gram for looking out for them that summer. And look out for them, they did. Ashlyn’s popularity among soccer fans in the US continued to grow. Her interview specials that she had done, and continued to do, with other NWSL players for Lifetime TV were huge hits within the women’s soccer world and even started to get noticed in the broader sports media realm. ESPN had won the rights to broadcast the Women’s World Cup from France that month and they wanted Ashlyn to join their broadcast team on the ground in France for the duration of the tournament. It was basically a dream come true gig. If you couldn’t play in it then the next best thing would be to participate as a commentator or a coach. The keeper really wanted to do it and Ali even told her she should go and do it because it could be her only chance. The opportunity might not come around again. It was an incredibly difficult decision to make and the brunette didn’t want her wife to regret turning it down. But Ashlyn was adamant about it. She knew where she needed and wanted to be, and it was at the big old house with her new baby and her beautiful brunette. They had discussed it in early May when she first received the offer.

“We’re never going to get that time back Al, and I know it sounds so cheesy, but it’s precious time. Nothing is more important to me than you and our baby. Nothing.”

“It’s only a month though honey” Ali tried to convince her to go so she could be sure there would be no regrets. “We’ll still be here and there will still be lots of precious time. Your mom is coming and then my mom is coming. I won’t be alone...”

“I know what a big opportunity it is and if you’re pressuring me into going because you’re my agent and it’s your job, then that’s fine. I know if I don’t go do this it will hurt my post-soccer career. I get it and I take responsibility for it. Don’t worry, I won’t blame you.”

Ashlyn’s words had more bite to them than she intended and she immediately felt guilty.

“Are you fucking kidding me right now” Ali snapped back from her seat in the nook. She had been writing thank you notes for the last of the baby shower gifts that Sunday afternoon when the blonde returned from her away game in Houston. “You’re something else” the brunette shook her head, her face darkened in anger, as she folded a card and tucked it inside the accompanying envelope.

The couple had been working on defining the dividing line between Ali as wife and Ali as agent
and business manager ever since the disastrous honeymoon postponement debacle a year and a half before. They had been to see their therapist about it a few times and felt like they were making progress on the issue. There hadn’t been a big dust-up about it in months. The brunette paid much more attention to how she ‘handled’ her wife as opposed to how she ‘handled’ her star athlete client. It had been difficult for her to establish the boundaries at first but she had done it successfully for a long time. It was almost becoming second nature to Ali to take off her business manager hat when they were talking about regular life. She certainly wasn’t perfect and when she veered the wrong way she either caught herself or Ashlyn reminded her and she was able to get back on track pretty quickly. There were bigger ramifications for the brunette too and she and Mattie had been working on what kind of a mother she wanted to be. She had all the personality traits to become an overbearing and overprotective mother and she desperately wanted to avoid both. Ali knew she had to learn how to be comfortable letting the people she loved the most make their own mistakes and learn from them. Her own history and her experience with Kyle and his addiction all contributed to why she felt the need to help the ones she loved so much. There was real, life experience that proved to her just how much help they really did need. With all of that past experience and therapy work swirling around them that afternoon at the nook table, they both knew they were walking through another minefield. The blonde made the first attempt to back out of it.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it to sound like that.” Her words were sincere and she dropped her eyes to the floor because the fury and hurt she saw in the cinnamon ones she loved so much made her feel even more guilty. “I know you’re not pushing me to go as my agent.”

“You must have meant it or you wouldn’t have said it” the brunette replied sharply.

“Al, listen...”

“No” she interrupted curtly. “Tell me how I’m supposed to encourage and support you as your wife. Tell me what I’m supposed to say so that it doesn’t sound too agent-y.” She paused and fought back a rush of emotions that seemed to gather right in her throat. She did not want to cry. She was pissed off. Stupid hormones. She swallowed and looked at Ashlyn sitting in the chair at the end of the nook table with her head up now, sensing the brunette’s emotional shift. “Go on, tell me.”

Instead of trying to talk, the blonde slid the table out away from Ali and knelt next to her legs. She wrapped her arms around Ali’s waist and huge baby bump and rested her head in what was left of her wife’s lap. Ali froze for a few seconds, her hands in the air above her wife. She knew if she touched her keeper she would melt and she wasn’t ready to let this fight go yet. She had worked so hard to try and avoid miscommunications just like this one and she honestly wanted to know what she could have said differently. Plus, she was still hurt and angry. So she put her hands down on the banquette on either side of her, closed her eyes, leaned her head back against the back of the bench seat and sighed audibly.

“You didn’t sound like my agent” the keeper said as she turned her head to face out, so her cheek was on Ali’s knees. “I’m sorry baby. You didn’t deserve that. I’m just overwhelmed and confused.” She squeezed her wife’s lower back and legs with her arms. “I’m sorry.”

There was a rule Ali had learned from her days in sales and it had always been true, even when she thought there was no way it could possibly work, it always did. If you said you were sorry three times the other person had no choice but to believe you and start to soften towards you. It was some psychological thing that had been tested and proven. And goddamn if Ashlyn didn’t just apologize for the third time. Ali felt her entire mood shift and, without even making a conscious decision to move them, her hands went to her wife’s blonde head and upper back. Ashlyn squeezed
 harder when she felt the contact and closed her eyes as a few tears escaped.

“Babe” Ali started, her voice calm but strong. “I want you to go if you want to go. I need you to know that I understand what a huge opportunity this is for you and I will never hold it against you if you decide to go. But, most importantly, I don’t want you to ever regret it if you decide to turn it down.” She was rubbing the keeper’s back and stroking her head as she spoke. “As your agent, I’d be an idiot if I didn’t tell you to go. I mean, it’s the fucking World Cup. But as your wife, I just want you to be ok with whatever you decide. That’s all that matters to me honey.” She paused and felt the wetness of her keeper’s tears through her stretchy pants. “Do you know what you want?”

“I want the super power of teleportation so I can be here with you and then just zip over to France to do the game and then come right back here to you.” Ashlyn’s voice was sad and serious, even though her words were nonsensical. “That’s what I fucking want.”

The keeper told ESPN that she and her wife were expecting their first child at the end of May and that there was no way she could travel to France, no matter how much she wanted to. The network came back a few days later with a counter-proposal that was impossible to refuse. Ashlyn took a quick helicopter ride down to Bristol, Connecticut the afternoon before every game that the US played in the World Cup. She did her research for the US game, and as many of the other games as she could, spent the night in a hotel, and then sat in the ESPN studio as part of their broadcast team in the US. Because of the time change, the afternoon and evening games being played in France were broadcast live on ESPN six hours earlier. So America was watching the games starting usually between 10am and 2pm. Ashlyn sat in the studio from 8am to 5pm or so, whenever the last game in France finished, with the other ‘experts’ and talked about each game and result. The US played every four days so that meant that the blonde was away for a day and a half and then home for two and a half days, on a cycle, throughout the entire month.

She was a natural on air and did a great job. She did her homework so she knew what she was talking about, and she offered inciteful commentary from an active player’s perspective. It didn’t hurt that Rose Lavelle was the star midfielder for the USWNT and answered all of Ashlyn’s calls, even if they were live on the air. Ali needn’t have worried about letting the Ashlyn Harris brand suffer while she was on maternity leave. Ashlyn Harris herself took care of boosting her brand that month, and then some.

The other huge advantage that the blonde enjoyed was a good night’s sleep every fourth night. She was happiest about that, if she was being honest, especially the first two weeks of the month when baby Drew was still nursing every few hours. The disadvantage was painfully obvious and Ashlyn cried every time she left her wife and baby. She would have to stand in the mudroom for a few minutes to collect herself so she didn’t look like such a cryface when the car came to pick her up and take her to the helicopter. She told Ali to call her on her schedule, anytime she was awake enough to be able to talk. There was lots of down time at the studio in between the games so Ashlyn could take her phone call almost anytime, unless she was on the air. She had been honest with her broadcast team about how hard it was to leave her little family behind so when she made an occasional mistake on air they were quick to help her out. Ashlyn blanked on the name of one of the best strikers in the world when the US played Norway in the second game of the group stage and it was embarrassing. Julie Foudy was the anchor of the broadcast team in the studio, with Kate Markgraf and Abby Wambach on the ground in France with Ian Darke. Foudy, already a mother to two middle school aged kids, bailed her out as the blonde’s blank face turned red on live tv. “Ada Hederberg is the name your sleep-deprived brain can’t quite come up with” Foudy offered with a warm smile.

“Yes, thank you Jules” Ashlyn shook her head and blushed some more. “I’m sorry everybody” she
said to the camera and the room with a sheepish grin.

“For those of you who don’t know, which I’m assuming is pretty much everybody out there” Foudy spoke into the camera with a grin, “Ashlyn has a newborn baby at home. And we all know how little sleep new parents get for the first few months.” She chuckled and the camera went to Ashlyn who was still grinning shyly.

The broadcast went on from there without any other mishaps and no more mention of Ashlyn’s new baby was made for a few more weeks until the end of the tournament. The US team was playing great and they had finished first in their group, beating New Zealand and Norway and playing to a dramatic 3-3 draw against Brazil in the final game of the group stage. They defeated a Japan team, that had been getting worse since their 2015 World Cup loss, in the elimination round and then went on to beat Sweden in the quarterfinals. The US punched their ticket to the Finals with a gut-wrenching match against Canada. The US won that semi-final game 4-3 with Christen Press scoring the game-winner in the waning minutes of stoppage time. Meanwhile, in a storybook tale that no-one could have expected, France had managed to get to the Finals after playing some of the toughest matches in the entire tournament. They beat England, Australia and then Germany to get to the Finals on their home soil. The Final was a terrific match and the whole nation tuned in to watch and, hopefully, celebrate the US successfully defending their World Cup title. But it was France’s day. The game was close but France prevailed 2-1, crushing the hearts of millions of little girls across America who were discovering the USWNT team for the first time.

As that long Sunday at the end of June came to a close, the broadcast team gave their final thoughts and made their last statements on the US team and the tournament in general. The producers rolled the ‘thank you’ footage on the monitor behind the broadcast desk as Julie and Ashlyn joked with each other about spending the month together. One of the thank yous was from Ashlyn to her wife and Julie saw it and made a big deal out of the adorable picture of the brunette and an almost four-week old Andrew that was on the huge monitor behind them.

“You’d better thank your wife!” Foudy laughed as she looked at the picture. “How beautiful is that? You’re a lucky lady Harris.”

“I know” Ashlyn gushed as she blushed and looked at the picture of Ali with a huge, nose-crinkling grin on her face as she held their smiling son. “She’s the best and I’m the luckiest woman in the world.”

Everybody still watching could see the pure love all over the blonde’s smiling face and social media picked it up and ran with it. ‘Find yourself a girl who looks at you like this...’ There were the usual disgusting remarks from the pathetic homophobes of the world. But most of the comments revolved around how utterly in love the keeper looked. It was a sweet way to end what had been a challenging month for the blonde. Ashlyn had learned invaluable lessons, on the fly, about sitting at a broadcast desk, reading a teleprompter, talking with another broadcaster as well as the live broadcast team on location. She had done very well, especially considering it was her first time and she was not even operating at her best. ESPN told her that they loved her work and would be reaching out to her in the future, if she was interested. When she talked it over with her wife, agent Ali wisely told her to not sign anything and just take some time and think things over. ESPN didn’t have the rights to the Olympics next year and it might be smart to remain a free agent until after that next world-class event in case NBCSports wanted to get her involved in their coverage for the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo.

And life in the big old house had been challenging that month as well. They brought their four-day old son home Thursday afternoon and felt like strangers on a different planet. Thanks to Ali’s never-ending list they were set up pretty well at home. As far as the baby was concerned, he had
everything he needed right there in the master bedroom. They set up the small bassinette next to Ali’s side of the bed and moved the second gliding rocking chair over to Ashlyn’s side, near the dressing table. Baby Drew nursed and slept and peed and pooped and that was his life. He was awake for about an hour in between his every three-hour feedings, but that was it. And the brunette didn’t move around too much for the first couple of weeks either. She slept as much as she could when the baby slept, but not every time. She sat propped up in bed or in the glider when she nursed her son, sometimes even feeding him lying down. He didn’t care what position she was in as long as he could get the milk he was looking for. Ashlyn got up with her every time, even when the brunette told her not to bother and that it made more sense for at least one of them to get some sleep. But the keeper couldn’t do it. She was so excited to have her family home that she just couldn’t sleep through the feedings. She didn’t want to miss a minute of her son’s life if she didn’t have to. Ali’s logical brain told her it was just wasteful and that her wife should get her sleep so she could take care of the house and the dogs and the rest of their lives. But her heart loved it every time Ashlyn got up and brought their baby to her and then sat next to her for the thirty or forty minutes while he nursed. Sometimes they just watched him in amazement. Other times Ali leaned her head against the blonde’s shoulder and fell asleep, knowing her wife would wake her if necessary. Those were some of Ashlyn’s favorite times. Those were the moments when she knew that she had made the right decision about not going to France. She knew it all along, really, but those moments just emphasized how right she had been.

Ali’s body was slowly starting to heal as well. Once she finally embraced the idea that her only real job for the next month was to feed her baby nine or ten times a day, change his diaper five or six times a day and give him a bath every two or three days, it was easier for her to lie there and just be. When Ashlyn was home she did as much of the diaper changing and bathing as she could, although the brunette wanted to do it too. They ended up doing most of it together, to the surprise of absolutely no-one. The couple who spent so much time together pre-baby wasn’t going to all of a sudden stop wanting to be near each other post-baby. As Ali learned to be still she gave her body more of the rest it needed and it started to respond. She was afraid to look down there because she didn’t want to see how beat up it still was. She was trying to wait long enough for some real progress to be made before looking. But she was dying of curiosity too. Everything still hurt and was still swollen but it was better. She could feel improvement. She no longer dreaded going to the bathroom. It still hurt, but not nearly as much as it had on May 28th.

One afternoon in the middle of June, Ashlyn walked into the bathroom and surprised her wife.

“Hey Sugarplum, everything ok?” she asked when she saw Ali standing with her hands on her hips in the middle of the bathroom.

The brunette was wearing her big, fuchsia robe and chewing her bottom lip as she stared down at the tiled floor. She didn’t move or even look at the keeper when she answered in a flat voice.

“I’m going to look.”

Ashlyn raised her eyebrows and took a deep breath. Ali had decided to wait until her six-week postpartum checkup so she could give her body a chance to heal before she looked between her legs. The keeper had supported her decision, mainly because she didn’t want her to worry about anything other than taking care of Drew and trying to get enough sleep.

“What made you change your mind?” She walked over to Ali and kissed her cheek, resting her right hand on her lower back. “If you don’t mind me asking?”

Ali looked up at her wife in the big mirror over the vanity and let out a breath she didn’t know she
was holding. She saw her own reflection, tired face with dark circles under her eyes, all beneath a supremely messy bun on the top of her head. Her robe was open, exposing a slim two-inch strip of flesh from her neck down to the top of her dark curls. She chewed her lip some more and enjoyed Ashlyn’s hand moving gently over her lower back.

“It’s been three weeks. I don’t think I can wait three more.”

“Dr. Comello knows you pretty well.” The blonde, who hadn’t taken her eyes off of the side of Ali’s face yet, kissed her cheek again. “And she told you not to look.” Ashlyn moved her left hand through the gap in the robe and placed it on the brunette’s pregnancy pouch. Her belly still looked like she was about six months pregnant, which was completely normal. The keeper moved her thumb back and forth, caressing her wife’s stomach. “Do you want me to look?”

Ali was touched by the tenderness in her wife’s voice and she covered Ashlyn’s hand on her belly. She closed her eyes and leaned her head towards the blonde, nuzzling into her lips when she felt them on her cheekbone again.

“You need to give your body time honey” Ashlyn leaned her forehead against the brunette’s head as she spoke quietly, lips right next to Ali’s ear. “It took nine months to get it ready to deliver our baby boy. You can’t expect it to change back in three weeks.”

“I know” she sighed and opened her eyes, looking again at her reflection. She sighed again and squeezed the keeper’s hand on her belly.

Ashlyn stepped closer, bringing her body right up next to the brunette’s in a side hug. She turned her head, still leaning against Ali’s, and looked in the mirror. The keeper felt her wife relax against her and she smiled softly at her reflection.

“You are so beautiful baby” Ashlyn said as she reached around behind Ali with her right hand and pulled her robe open another inch. “Can I?”

Ali cringed initially when she heard the request, but it was delivered with such love and devotion that she couldn’t help but be moved by it. The look in her keeper’s eyes confirmed what she had heard and, after a moment’s hesitation, she nodded and held her breath. Ashlyn pulled the robe slowly with her right hand and moved her left hand across her wife’s stomach to drag the robe all the way open. The brunette let her hand drop down to her side, completely exposing herself to the woman she trusted with her heart and soul. Ali looked at the reflection of her swollen, hard-working breasts with their dark red nipples, a little worse for wear after three weeks of breastfeeding. Her pregnancy pouch, complete with a few tiny stretch marks on either side, near her hips, stuck out as if it was still housing a growing baby. She moved her eyes back up and exhaled when she saw the adoring look on her keeper’s face. The way Ashlyn gazed at her, with such reverence and love, made her forget all about looking early at things she wasn’t supposed to. The blonde carefully ran her left hand across Ali’s chest, down between her voluptuous breasts, and around her belly, her fingers just touching the top of her dark curls before coming back up to her hip. There was nothing sexual about this, although Ashlyn did feel a tug in her own core. She was only human and it had been a long three weeks, but that wasn’t what this was about. The blonde would always want Ali and had no doubt about it in her mind. Ashlyn didn’t know what her wife was going through or where her insecurities had come from. She couldn’t tell her it wasn’t a big deal or that her body didn’t look different. The brunette wasn’t blind and Ashlyn wasn’t going to lie to her. What she could do, what she wanted to do more than anything else, was to make sure Ali knew how beautiful she was at that very moment. She hadn’t seen her wife’s body in weeks, other than her breasts when she nursed the baby. Ali had started getting changed in the bathroom and neither of them was exactly sure why. Ashlyn got on her knees in front of her wife, a hand on
each hip, holding the robe open, while she pressed gentle kisses all over her stomach.

“So beautiful…” she murmured as she went on with her kisses.

“Ashlyn…” Ali said hesitantly as her body tensed.

The keeper looked up into those whiskey colored eyes and smiled broadly.

“I just need you to know how beautiful you are, that’s all” she said simply, with a small shrug of her shoulders and that smile.

“Ok, I get it. Really. Thank you babe” the brunette replied quietly and pulled her wife back up to stand in front of her. “I love you.”

They brought their lips together in a slow and sweet kiss as Ashlyn let the robe fall back into place and wrapped her wife up in a hug.

“How about a bath? Can I give you a bath? Or a massage?” the keeper asked as they pulled apart.

Ali smiled at her thoughtful wife and shook her head no.

“I’m ready to lie down, will you come snuggle with me?”

Ashlyn took her wife’s hand and led her back to the bedroom where their baby boy slept soundly in his bassinette.

“Always baby, always.”

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Tammye arrived that first Saturday they were home from the hospital. Whitney left for New Jersey for the Sky Blue game the same day. She was spending a couple of weeks with Ryan after the game and then going to California to visit her family for the rest of the month. And Ashlyn’s first helicopter flight to the ESPN studios was Sunday afternoon. Ali was glad to have Tammye there if for no other reason than they were having trouble remembering to do basic things like feed the dogs and sometimes even themselves. Sunday night the two women gave Drew his first bath at home and neither of them thought to take a picture of it for the keeper. Ashlyn’s only instructions to her mother before she left for Connecticut were to make sure Ali ate something.

“Now Ali I want to talk to you for a minute” Tammye said Sunday afternoon when it was just the two of them. “Is now an ok time?”

“Of course” the brunette smiled through tired eyes as she sat in the glider in the master bedroom, nursing the baby.

“I’m here to help” Tammye started, sitting on the bed and looking serious. “I’ll do anything you want me to do. All you have to do is ask. But I’m not here to be a pain in your neck, and if I am, just tell me. No hard feelings.”

“Tammye, we’re all glad you’re here. I’m still figuring out what the hell we’re doing, but I’m happy you’re here” Ali replied with a small smile. “I’m afraid you’re on your own though. No more guest. Full time GiGi” she chuckled and rolled her eyes.

“Oh you’re doing just fine honey. Don’t you doubt that for a minute.”

Tammye smiled as she watched her daughter-in-law lift the baby up and nod her head at her.
“You can burp him if you want” Ali offered sweetly.

Tammye got up and took her grandson in her arms, and the burp cloth Ali tossed up to her, and started walking around the room patting his little back and talking.

“I know the mother-in-law can be tough to deal with at times like this and I want you to know that it’s ok. I had the best mother-in-law in the world but even Gram got on my nerves when I had my babies.”

“She did?” Ali’s eyes were wide as she re-hooked her nursing top and made notes in the breastfeeding log.

“She did” Tammye confirmed as the baby burped. “Good boy Andrew. What a good boy.”

She moved back to the bed and sat down with the baby in the crook of her arm, mostly upright because he had just eaten. She never took her eyes off of him as she continued trying to get her message across to the brunette.

“My point is, I’m going to do something or say something that’s going to tick you off. It’s inevitable. It’s like a rite of passage. Not only do you have to go through all the trouble of giving birth and then trying to put your body back together. But you’ve got to survive the mother-in-law visit too.” She chuckled and glanced at the brunette who was watching her with a smile. “All I’m asking is that you tell me what it is so then I won’t do it again. Ok?”

“I can’t imagine...” Ali started, but Tammye cut her off.

“Trust me.”

But at the end of Tammye’s first week there still hadn’t been any incidents where the brunette had been upset with her. Ashlyn had come home and then gone again for game two and still no problems. Tammye took care of the dogs and went grocery shopping and did the laundry and the dishes. She kept Ali fed, thawing out the frozen pasta dishes the expectant mother had prepared beforehand and then heating them up for them both. They sat together on the bed and watched Ashlyn on tv, marveling at the woman they were both so proud of. Tammye made herself scarce when Sydney and Cash or Ken and Vicki came to visit that first week. She reluctantly joined Ken, Vicki and Ali for dinner in the nook when the elder Kriegers brought Thai food while Ashlyn was away at game 2. The brunette had always appreciated the way her mother-in-law was able to stay in the background, operating on a lower volume than others in her family. She couldn’t imagine having a better mother-in-law and she made a mental note to make sure to tell Tammye that before she left.

Carol flew up and joined Tammye for her second week at the big old house. Ashlyn had assured her mother, when she had asked, that Carol was more than welcome to come and stay, anytime. That was also the week that Ashlyn was going to be able to start feeding the baby from a bottle which would, hopefully, allow Ali to get some sleep. Carol was as considerate a houseguest as Tammye always had been. She was also an awesome cook. She was a real, southern cook who knew what it meant to get a good scald on her fried chicken and other things that Ali had only heard of on cooking shows or in movies. There was something appealing about her that the brunette couldn’t quite put her finger on before. But that week it finally hit her. Carol reminded her, in a way, of Sarah. There was something classy and well-heeled about both of them that drew Ali in. They weren’t aloof or snobbish but there was no way either of them would be doing any fart jokes at the next get-together. Ashlyn had hoped to spend a bit more time with her mother’s new girlfriend but that was not the week for that, unfortunately.
Debbie Christopher flew in the following Saturday and Tammye and Carol were flying out the day after, on Sunday. That Saturday night the five women were all together and having a good time laughing and talking and teasing their daughters about motherhood. Ali had come downstairs to be more social and had just finished nursing the baby in the living room. The two grandmothers sat next to each other on the couch as Tammye tried to coax a burp out of the adorable little baby.

It wasn’t until the keeper got a few minutes alone with her that Carol tackled the unspoken thing between them. They were cleaning up the kitchen after one last delicious meal the southerner had prepared.

“Listen, there’s no good way to broach this subject so I’m just going to say it. I think you can handle it” Carol chuckled nervously as she hung the dishtowel up to dry out. Ashlyn kept her eyes ahead of her, rinsing the sink one last time as Carol continued. “I know you’re worried about your mother and I just want you to know that I love her. We’re still figuring everything out and taking it slow until we’re both ready, but I want you to know I’m not going to hurt her. Ever.”

Ashlyn shut the water off and turned around, drying her hands as she did so. She appraised the woman standing in front of her, trying to hide her nerves at talking to someone so important to the woman she loved.

“Well that’s good to hear. But mom can take care of herself” Ashlyn defended her mother for some unnecessary reason. “She’s been through a lot and she’s a tough lady.”

“I know” Carol smiled weakly, as if Tammye’s past troubles caused her pain right now talking about it. “We’ve talked about it. She knows what I’ve been through too. We’ve been honest with each other all along.”

“Are you an alcoholic too?” Ashlyn was surprised by her own bluntness.

But Carol didn’t bat an eye. “No, no troubles like that for me, but I’ve given up drinking. In case you’re worried about that” she added quickly. “Your mother is more important to me than any drink ever could be.”

The keeper couldn’t help but be impressed by that one. There was something about Carol that spooked her but she still couldn’t put her finger on it. Until something happened she would trust her mother’s gut.

“I appreciate you telling me this Carol” Ashlyn gave her a small smile. “I’m glad mom’s with someone who really loves her. You’ve been wonderful to our whole family, for a while now, and that means a lot too. And I look forward to getting to know you better myself.”

They re-joined the others in the living room and Ashlyn knelt down next to the recliner and began rubbing her wife’s legs. Ali smiled appreciatively and pulled her closest hand up to her lips so she could kiss it. Carol sat on the couch, next to Tammye who was holding Drew as Deb looked on adoringly from the other side of her. As much as Deb wanted to hold her grandson, there was no way she would deprive Tammye the pleasure on her last night. Deb had all summer to spend with the baby but Tammye’s two weeks were already up. The dogs had adjusted well to the new addition, although the stream of visitors had distracted them so their good behavior might not be as real as they hoped. Persey was curled up next to Deb on the couch and Fred was in the dog bed in the front of the room. Ali looked around the room and felt her emotions swell. They had so many people in their lives who loved them and would do anything for them. Tammye had given up her only two weeks of vacation for the whole year to come and help them. Deb was giving up her entire summer to help them adjust to life with a new baby. The love the brunette felt at that moment for the women in that room was overpowering. She said another silent thank you to the
universe and tried to keep her tired eyes open a little while longer.
Deb moved into the guest room and stayed all summer long and all three women could not have been happier about it. Well, four women if you included Whitney. It was wonderful to have her fun and positive energy in the house all the time. By the end of June Drew was sleeping for four hours at a time and had been able to figure out how to drink from a bottle as well as his mother’s breasts so life got a little bit nicer for everyone. The World Cup Final was on June 30th and Ashlyn took the helicopter home that same Sunday night for the last time. The Breakers had a home game on Saturday July 6th against the Portland Thorns. Ashlyn had made plans, at the beginning of the year, to have Whitney’s bachelorette party on Thursday, the 4th of July. Tobin Heath and the other Tarheel ladies on the Thorns were coming to Boston early just so they could celebrate with Whitney. The keeper had arranged a private room at one of the nicer hotels right on the Charles River in Cambridge and everybody had booked a room for the night too. It was pretty close to their new Knight-Harris offices. The hotel had a great view of the fireworks from the river side rooms as well as the private room. The private room was set up with a DJ and a bar and some catered food. Ashlyn even had some game tables brought in, like a pool table and a foosball table. It was going to be a great night and a lot of fun without being over the top. The keeper knew her best friend would be worried about her friends and teammates getting into trouble that night instead of having fun at her own bachelorette party so she made it as private and secluded and safe as possible.

There were only two problems with the plan. One was that she had just spent a ton of time away from her exhausted wife and newborn baby and was now spending another night away from them after only being home for three days. Two was that the 4th of July was Ali’s favorite holiday and Ashlyn was pretty sure her beautiful brunette wasn’t going to want to come to the party. Originally, when she had consulted Ali about throwing the party on the 4th of July back in February, they had both agreed that it would be two months after the birth of the baby and that Ali would probably be ready for a night out. But that was before the ESPN gig and Drew coming two weeks late. She was also about to start playing soccer again and the Breakers had five games in the month of July. Three of them were on the road. Ashlyn wasn’t sure what to do now. She wanted Ali to come to the party with her, even if they only stayed for a little while and went back to their hotel room and just slept. But she didn’t want to pressure her into something her body wasn’t ready for either. She asked Deb about it her first morning back as they ate breakfast. Ali had fed the baby and gone back to sleep for a couple of hours.

“So what do you think?” the blonde asked her mother-in-law after explaining about the party and expressing her concerns.

Deb finished chewing the food in her mouth as she pondered the question. She took a drink of juice and replied.

“That’s a toughie. I think it would be great for her to get out of the house. That’s for sure. But I know she’ll fight it. She won’t want to leave the baby. But it’s almost been six weeks...I think we should push her to do it and hope for the best.” She had paused for a moment before delivering the last line confidently and smiling at her daughter-in-law.
“Easy for you to say” Ashlyn sighed and grumbled. “You won’t be the one in the doghouse if it doesn’t go over well.”

For the month of July they had worked out a plan where Ali got up for the night feedings so Ashlyn could get her sleep. She was a professional athlete and a good night’s sleep was essential to keeping her playing her best as well as injury-free. Deb and Ashlyn, when she wasn’t at her away games, would bottle feed the two-month old in the early morning and then the last feeding of the night so the brunette could go to sleep early and then go back to bed again in the morning for a little more sleep. Deb was taking the early morning feeding and Ashlyn the last one before bedtime. The extra sleep made everybody happier and healthier. Ali was still exhausted but she didn’t feel like a half-wit all the time anymore. She felt more like her old self and part of that was the sleep and part of that was some of the pregnancy hormones settling down. She still felt like she was seeing everything through a gauzy film, as if she needed to clean her glasses before she could see clearly. It was just the exhaustion, but it still freaked her out sometimes. Her entire life had changed and even though she had prepared for it as best she could, she felt lost and alone for a little while every day. Of course she had her beautiful baby boy and she wouldn’t change a thing. But it was a strange and desolate feeling those first several weeks.

Deb was folding towels on the nook table the next afternoon when Ashlyn plopped herself down in one of the nook chairs, sighing heavily. She had Drew in her arms and she turned him around in her lap so he could watch his grandmother. He had just learned how to grab things with his little fingers and he held onto the keeper’s long fingers while she moved them around for him. He was making lots of chirps and noises and even a few vowel sounds as he watched Deb.

“Well, that did not go well” the keeper admitted with a small groan.

“Oh, I’m sorry Ash. I thought it was the right thing to do too. How bad was it?”

“Oh, you know.” Ashlyn was never one to complain about her wife, especially not to her own mother. “I can’t blame her a bit. We had it all planned out but then...”

“Life got in the way” Deb smiled and reached over to tickle Drew’s tummy as he watched her.

“Exactly” the keeper agreed. “And what a wonderful life it is, huh sweet boy?” she bent down and kissed her son’s cheek and then both of his hands, still wrapped around her two fingers. “But mommy’s birthday is coming up and we’re going to go away for the night and you’re going to stay here with Grandma, right?”

“That’s right baby boy” Deb agreed with a huge smile and a chuckle. “Won’t that be fun?”

The conversation Ashlyn had just had upstairs with her wife had really not gone well at all. The blonde, buoyed by Deb’s encouragement the morning before, had pressured Ali into coming to the party with her and spending the 4th of July and watching the fireworks with her from the hotel. And the brunette had bristled at the pressure. It was their first real fight since the baby’s birth and it left them both feeling sad and defeated. Ali was also pissed off and had stormed into the bathroom and locked the door behind her in a huff. The keeper had picked up their son and retreated down the backstairs. It wasn’t until later that evening that they were able to talk about it.

“Ali I’m sorry about pushing you to go to Whit’s party” Ashlyn said as she sat on the edge of the big tub and met her wife’s eyes. “I don’t know what you need or want and it’s hard...”

“I know” the brunette interrupted softly from inside the tub. “You think it’s a good idea and that I should get out of the house. My mom thinks so too.”
“Did she talk to you about it?”

“She did.”

Ashlyn groaned and rubbed her face with both hands. The last thing she wanted was for Ali to feel like they were ganging up on her.

“All I know is that it felt good for me to get out of the house. Of course, I took it to the extreme. But I still think my point is valid. But I’m not breastfeeding and I didn’t just give birth to our son and...”

“Ash, it’s ok.” Ali’s voice was still soft. “You’re probably right. I don’t know. I barely know what I need or want these days” she chucked softly and leaned her head back against the headrest on the edge of the tub. “There’s no way you could possibly know, so please don’t feel bad.”

“But I do feel bad” she grumbled. “I feel like you’re doing this really hard thing all by yourself and I don’t know how to help you. I feel like I’m already messing up this being a mom thing and being a bad wife all at the same time.”

Ali reached her hand out and motioned for her keeper to sit closer to her.

“Come here” she beckoned as Ashlyn came and sat right next to her on the edge of the tub. Ali took her hand and intertwined their fingers, resting them both on Ashlyn’s lap. “You’re not messing anything up babe. I promise you. Look at me.” She waited until the keeper met her eyes. “You’re a great mom and you’re the best wife in the world. Don’t you ever doubt either of those things again. Got it?”

Ashlyn nodded and gave her brunette a small, shy grin.

“I’m not fishing for compliments Al. But thank you.” She lifted Ali’s hand to her lips and kissed it. “I just need you to tell me what you need so I can get it or do it for you. I know we’re both tired, well, you way more than me. But I feel like...like we’re out of synch.” She stopped and took a minute to try and stop her tears from welling up in her eyes. She took a deep breath and kept going. “I miss you and I know it’s my fault because I’ve been gone so much, but I just...I miss you.”

Ali’s heart broke as she listened to her keeper’s words and worries. She felt the same way but hadn’t taken the time to even tell her.

“Will you come sit with me” the brunette asked in a small, shy voice as she patted the water next to her.

Ashlyn hesitated for a couple of seconds, trying to remember what Drew was doing and how long it would be before he needed his next bottle.

“Please?”

The keeper stood up and took her clothes off and then stepped into the tub. She carefully got into place next to her wife and was surprised, and thrilled, when Ali turned to her and brought their lips together in a kiss. It was tender and tentative at first, but then the brunette deepened it, sliding her tongue across Ashlyn’s lips and slipping it inside her mouth as soon as she opened it for her. They spent the next twenty minutes making out and trying to get back in synch. They both knew this wasn’t going to fix the problem. They would have to figure out a way to communicate even though they were tired and missing each other. But in the meantime, this was the closest they had felt since the baby had been born. And for Ali, it was the first time she had felt any sort of sexual desire for her wife since then too. When Ashlyn had taken her clothes off to get into the tub the brunette
felt that old familiar tug in her core. Between her body recovering and her mind being so tired she honestly had no idea what Ashlyn had been doing to get through six long, lonely weeks with no sex and very little contact other than innocent, exhausted cuddling. Ali felt terrible as she realized how little she had thought about her wife’s needs. It was one thing to not be able to have sex yet but to not even spend one minute considering what was going on with her wife was really a low point for her.

“I love you so much Ashlyn” the brunette pulled back and spoke solemnly, eyes focused on the blonde’s beautiful face. “It’s been a tough six weeks for both of us, but it’s only going to get better. Right?”

“That’s right baby” Ashlyn agreed and cupped Ali’s face, rubbing her cheek with her thumb. “We’ll figure it out. Everything’s ok.” She leaned forward and kissed her wife’s lips softly. “I love you.”

They kissed for a few more minutes and the keeper moaned into Ali’s mouth, lost in the sensation that she had been craving so much.

“We have my six-week check-up on Monday” Ali breathed out as they broke the kiss for air. “Can we please make plans for more of this that night?”

“Yes please” Ashlyn murmured as she moved her lips to the brunette’s neck.

Maybe it was the fact that her body was hidden under the bubbles of the bathwater. Maybe it was just the incredible power of her wife’s body and touch. Maybe it was six weeks of not having a single sexual impulse finally catching up with her. Ali didn’t know what was happening. All she knew was that she wanted Ashlyn. She wanted to feel her skin and taste her passion and hold her body close. Her own body felt different though. Her breasts were so sore and tender from acting as feed bags for her hungry baby that she cringed at the idea of the blonde touching them at all. Her pregnancy belly left her feeling less than sexy and she shuddered to think about what it looked like between her legs. She could feel the twinge inside her pussy and the ache in her clit and that gave her hope that they might actually be able to get their sex life back on track at some point. But she wasn’t getting wet and that stumped her. She felt the nice, tingly sensations running all through her system. Everything was reacting as it used to, just slower and a little duller, except there was no passion pooling between her legs. Maybe it was the bathtub or something. She wasn’t going to worry about it. This was real progress and she wanted to enjoy it while she could. She was brought out of her thoughts by Ashlyn’s soft, somewhat strangled voice.

“We should stop” she panted out as she pulled back from the passionate kiss, eyes screwed shut and cheeks flushed.

The keeper was losing her mind and it took all of her willpower to utter those words. It had been a tough six weeks and she had been longing for exactly this type of time with her beautiful brunette. But Ali wasn’t supposed to have sex until Dr. Comello cleared her, hopefully at her appointment on Monday. Ashlyn could wait six more days, couldn’t she? God Ali felt good in her arms and in her mouth. Her breasts still made the blonde nervous, they were always so sore and sensitive that she was honestly too afraid to touch them. But seeing the hunger in her wife’s eyes for the first time in so long was the best gift she had ever been given. There had been many times when Ashlyn wondered if it would ever come back. She knew that the brunette was occupied, mind and body, with taking care of their infant son, just as she should be. The keeper knew that. But she still had moments of doubt, she couldn’t help it. But that evening, there in the soaking tub with the love of her life, she would take her small victory and be thankful. The steamy make-out session would have been reward enough, but to see that look in Ali’s eyes again. That was everything.
“Let me take care of you babe, please?” the brunette whispered in her wife’s ear and then kissed down her neck. “I know it’s too soon for me, but let me help you” she purred as her right hand started to move from its’ safe spot on Ashlyn’s side down towards her hip.

They had both kept their hands out of trouble, resting them on each other’s side and keeping them there, only occasionally squeezing and flexing their fingers. Ashlyn opened her eyes and started to protest but all it took was one look into those beautiful, cinnamon eyes and she lost her voice. She whimpered and swallowed hard as she felt Ali’s hand slide back and forth between her hips, just teasing the top of her short hairs. Ashlyn bit her bottom lip and shifted so she was flat on her back, still leaning against the end of the tub. The brunette took this as a yes and kissed her wife’s lips again, swallowing another moan from the keeper, as her hand moved lower and scratched across her mound. She broke the kiss with a tug on Ashlyn’s bottom lip, and carefully moved herself down towards the blonde’s hip. Ali pulled her wife’s right leg up and over towards her, opening her up so she could get her hand where she wanted it and where she knew her wife needed it.

“I love you Ashlyn, you’re so beautiful.”

“I love you too baby.”

They gazed at each other lovingly as the brunette spread her wife’s folds. Ali groaned and closed her eyes when she felt how wet her keeper was. She heard the water move and looked to see Ashlyn with one hand on her own breasts and the other making its’ way to her own clit. Goddamn this woman was sexy. Ali all of a sudden felt like she was going to cry and fought desperately not to. She knew it was just her hormones pinging around inside her and she didn’t want to ruin the mood for her wife. She wasn’t sure why she needed to cry but she was pretty sure it had something to do with tapping into her sexual desire again. It would be a good cry but she still didn’t want to take the time to explain it to Ashlyn. Not at that moment. That moment was for her girl, finally. Her sweet, devoted, wonderful keeper who had been with her every step of the way. Even when she was in Connecticut she managed to call and text her support every single day. Ali watched her close her eyes and arch her back as she entered her with two fingers. Her mouth moved as she responded to the brunette’s fingers starting to thrust inside her needy center. There was no teasing or delaying. There had been too much time already gone by. Ali drove her fingers deep inside her wife’s hungry pussy and tried to hold onto her own swollen breasts to keep them still. They were swaying back and forth with the thrusting of her arm and it was painful. She could already feel Ashlyn’s walls starting to clamp down on her fingers as she increased her pace. Ali watched her wife’s long fingers rub her own clit, fast and hard and knew it would only take a few more seconds before she found her release. She curled her fingers up and felt Ashlyn come all over her hand as her orgasm hit her. The blonde jerked and shook and moaned, biting her lip to try and keep quiet as she came hard. Ali kept her fingers inside her, slowly stroking and enjoying how much passion her wife had spilled for her. She leaned down and kissed Ashlyn’s knee, right in front of her, before sliding back up to the end of the tub to kiss her lips.

“Thank you so much baby” Ashlyn panted out. “Damn that felt good” she grinned.

“I’m sorry I haven’t helped...”

“Alexandra Krieger” the blonde began, seriously, even though she was still coming down from her high. “You have been doing exactly what you were supposed to be doing. There’s nothing more important in this whole world than taking care of our baby boy and making sure he’s growing and getting stronger. Nothing.” She held Ali’s face in both hands and kissed her lips softly. “I don’t want to hear you say another word about it, ever. Understood?”

“Ok” the brunette agreed with a tiny smile. “I love you honey, so much.”
Ashlyn kissed her lips again. “I love you too. But you should be sleeping now and I need to go get his last bottle ready. Let me help you up.”

Without saying anything else, Ali let her wife help her out of the tub and dry her off, enjoying their newfound intimacy. Neither of them wanted to leave the bathroom, afraid the spell would break. But life went on and duty called.

“You’re going to that party if I have to drag you there myself” Sydney stated, quirking an eyebrow at her best friend and challenging her to argue.

It was the next day, Wednesday, the day before the party, and the two young mothers were sitting on the living room floor of the big old house. Drew was practicing his tummy time while Cash stacked large cardboard bricks four or five high and then knocked them down and laughed. Sandi and Deb were in the kitchen making lunch and Whitney and Ashlyn were at training. Boss and the dogs were in the backyard running around and barking at things only they could see or hear. One of the things that Ali was most looking forward to that summer was hanging out with Sydney and Cash. She had never been happier about her best friend being a teacher who had summers off.

“It’s one night” the coach continued when she saw the stubborn look on Ali’s face. “You’ll be gone less than twenty-four hours. You’re being ridiculous.”

It took some more strong-arm tactics and some good old-fashioned tag-teaming but Ali finally agreed to go to the party. She had also admitted to Sydney that part of her hesitation was not having anything to wear.

“Who do you think you’re fooling?” the coach called her bluff. “I know you and your online shopping habit” she chuckled. “You already own a hundred pairs of stretchy pants. Let’s go see what you ordered for nursing tops.”

Later that night the brunette was on her way up to bed and she stopped in the living room to talk to Ashlyn for a minute. She leaned in the door way and felt her heart soar as she saw her wife sitting in the recliner, legs up with an ice bag wrapped around her knee. She was catching up on Shark Week, which had started Sunday, and she was talking quietly to Drew, nestled in her arms and staring at his mama’s face. The keeper had her head turned down towards him so she was watching the show from the corner of her eye as she explained how sharks use sonar to find things in the ocean. Persey started to wag her tail from her spot on the couch and got Ashlyn’s attention.

“Hey baby” she said sheepishly. “How long have you been standing there?”

“Just a few minutes” Ali beamed back as she walked across the room and sat down next to Persey on the end of the couch.

Ashlyn paused the tv and turned the recliner towards the couch so she could talk with her wife.

“He can’t even see the tv yet, I looked it up. He hears the sounds and then my voice but that’s it” she explained quickly.

“I think it’s great that you’re starting him on Shark Week. No sense waiting a whole other year” the brunette reached out and patted her wife’s leg. “How’s your knee?”

“It’s ok. Just a knock. Just trying to keep ahead of it” she answered with a quick glance down at her leg. “Are you off to bed? I think your mom might already be up there too.”

“I was just talking with her in the other room” she nodded her head toward the family room where Deb was watching one of her shows.
“Uh oh, is she sick of us already? She’s leaving isn’t she?” Ashlyn was teasing but the words scared them both more than they wanted to admit.

“No” Ali chuckled. “She’s good. Don’t worry. I wanted to check with her before I came and talked to you.”

“Whatever I did, I’m really sorry and it won’t happen again, I swear” the blonde teased again.

“Stop being silly” the brunette chastised with a giggle. “I’m trying to talk to you.”

“Oh boy, it’s serious now Drew” she spoke out of the side of her mouth towards the baby in the crook of her arm. “One of us is in big trouble and it’s most definitely me.”

“Ok, well if you don’t want to talk to me about the party tomorrow night then that’s fine” Ali said coyly as she started to get up off the couch.

“Whoa, hold up” Ashlyn straightened up and got serious. “What about the party?”

“Oh nothing really...” it was Ali’s turn to tease. “Just that I’ve decided to go and...”

“Really?!” Ashlyn’s excitement shot out of her body as her face leapt into a huge, dimple-bearing grin.

“Yes, shhhh...don’t get him excited.”

“Right” the keeper nodded her head and made her voice low and calm.

They were trying to get Drew into the beginnings of a schedule, starting with helping him identify when it was time to go to sleep for the night. It was never too early to start some sort of bedtime ritual. Keeping things quiet and calm was step one.

“Is it still ok if I come?” Ali asked, suddenly unsure if she had missed some sort of RSVP deadline or something.

“Of course. It’s great if you come. The best” the keeper tried to keep her voice calm and steady. “Is your mom still ok to watch him for the night?”

“Yep. Everything’s all set.”

The next afternoon was tough. Ashlyn and Whitney had left earlier to go pick up their friends at the airport and then head over to the hotel. The keeper had taken her wife’s overnight bag with her so she wouldn’t have to bother with it. Ali was having severe second-thoughts about leaving her baby and Deb was doing her best to coax her into getting into Ashlyn’s Suburu and going. Nobody had thought about this part and Deb was kicking herself for not seeing this coming. Just when she was about to give up and let her daughter chicken out, the mudroom door opened and Sydney swooped in. Of course Sydney, the newest mom in the bunch, had thought of how hard it would be for Ali to physically leave the house.

“Ready to go Alibaba?” she asked as she walked over to her best friend and lifted the baby out of her arms. “Who’s the cutest little man in here?” she cooed at Drew as she held him high and nuzzled her face into his belly, making him laugh. “That’s right. You are.” She kissed him on both cheeks and handed him to Deb. “I think he needs a change Momma D” she said and winked.

“Oh, you’re right, better get right on that” Deb went along. “Let’s say goodbye to Mommy now. We’ll see her tomorrow afternoon.”
Ali smiled down at her son and kissed his face three times, trying not to cry.

“I’ll see you soon sweet boy” she whispered as she squeezed her mother’s arm in fear and gratitude. “You be good for Grandma now.”

“He’s always a good boy for Grandma” Deb winked. “I promise I’ll call if anything comes up. I promise.” She kissed Ali’s cheek. “Now go and have fun. You’ve earned it honey.”

The party was awesome. The entire Breakers team was there, along with most of the staffers and some coaches, ladies only of course. Tobin Heath, Meghan Klingenberg and Allie Long were all there after flying in early for their Portland game Saturday night. There were seven or eight other Tarheel teammates that had flown in for the big party too, along with several Boston Pride players that Whitney had befriended over the past five years in Boston. Whitney’s agent and friend, Jennifer, was there. Some of the defender’s best friends from high school had made the trip as well. Niki and Molly were both there, as were Ali’s core group of friends – Carm, Jessie, Liz, Erica and Heather. Ryan’s sister Caitlin had even come up from New York. Ashlyn, Whitney’s matron of honor, had been very satisfied with the great response she received when she had planned the party in February. It was gratifying to know that so many people loved Whitney as much as she did. There were about fifty or so attendees and they were having a great time in the private room. The DJ was excellent and had a good handle on the type of party as well as the mood of the crowd. They ate and drank and danced and played games for a couple of hours and then took a break to open presents. Ashlyn dutifully wrote down what everyone had given the bride-to-be so she could send thank you cards later. Then it was almost time for the fireworks to start at 10:30pm. The private room was located high enough in the hotel so they had a terrific view of the Charles River and the fireworks display. The DJ got the audio for the show and piped it into the room and everyone oohed and aahed as the different colors lit up the dark sky for a little over thirty minutes.

Ali and Sydney had arrived a little bit early and checked into their hotel rooms. Sydney was sharing a room with Kristie Mewis because getting a room on the river on the 4th of July was not cheap. The coach had made sure to get her best friend to the hotel early because she had also arranged a massage for them up in the brunette’s room. It was an early birthday present and Ali could not have been more appreciative. She cried and hugged Sydney, not caring that her hormones were going crazy. She knew the coach would understand. And as Sydney had expected, and hoped, the brunette fell asleep during the massage and didn’t wake up until Ashlyn went up to check on her an hour before the party was set to start.

As they stood there together, watching the fireworks in that room full of people, Ali thought about how grateful she was. She leaned her head back into her wife’s shoulder as Ashlyn held her from behind and watched the colors dance across the sky. And as usual, they felt like they were the only ones in the room and like those fireworks were just for them. The brunette could feel Ashlyn’s heart beating behind her and her arms wrapped around her tight. She breathed in the scent of the woman she loved and let it fill her senses, like a drug. She listened to the small noises and gasps and breaths her keeper made as she enjoyed the fireworks exploding above them. Even though the whole night felt sort of like an out of body experience for Ali, even though part of her felt like she was in the wrong place and should be home with her little baby, even with all of that trying to push its’ way into her brain, Ali knew there was nowhere else she would rather be. Standing there in Ashlyn’s arms, sharing their fireworks with the world, was exactly where she was supposed to be.
The next day the Breakers had the morning off and just their afternoon training. The rest of the Portland Thorns players had a travel day so Tobin, Kling and Allie were going to do some sightseeing in Boston and Cambridge. The group of friends met for a late breakfast and then Ali and Ashlyn took them over to see the new Knight-Harris offices. The keeper couldn’t be sure if it was the extra sleep or the massage or the night away or the fireworks but Ali had a spark that she hadn’t seen since before the baby was born. The blonde watched her wife proudly talk about the offices as she walked everyone through the space. Jen chimed in occasionally and Ashlyn joked every time somebody asked her a question.

“Don’t look at me” she shrugged her shoulders and made a confused face, “I just work here.”

Now that the space was fully functional, the agents were trying to get their clients in to welcome them whenever they came to town for a game. Jen and Paige were planning to show many of the rest of the Thorns players their new space the next day during the down time before the game. And the agents went out of their way to go out with the visiting players after all of the Breakers games to check in with them and welcome them to Boston and make sure they felt like they could talk to K-H about anything they might need. It was that kind of extra level of care and concern that proved tough for other agencies to match. It had just been common sense to K-H when they were talking about what type of agents and agency they wanted to be. The company was about to bring on two more agents so they could finally attack the WNBA market that year as well. They didn’t want to bring in just anybody. The new agents had to fit in and believe in the core values of K-H just like Jen, Paige and Jerry did. Ali was hoping she could hold off those additions for a couple more months until she was really back on her feet. She had six months maternity leave but knew she would get back into more of the business before then. She wouldn’t officially go back to work, but she would slowly get herself more involved and pick a project or two to focus on until she was back full time December 1st. But she had promised herself she wouldn’t do anything except take care of her baby for the first three months. She owed it to herself and Drew to keep that time as sacred as possible.

“You guys know that if you need some promo pics or a testimonial or anything like that, all you have to do is say the word” Tobin offered as they drove back to the hotel.

“Tobes, you don’t have to do that” Ashlyn answered quietly from the driver’s seat of Ali’s truck. “I know you hate that stuff. We’re ok. But thank you.”

“Nah, you guys are family” the midfielder replied with a warm smile. “I’ll do anything for family.” She paused for a minute before continuing. “And I’m coming up to see that baby tomorrow, before we hit the beach Ash. Is that ok?”

“More than” the keeper grinned into the rear-view mirror.
“It’ll be his first game too” Ali spoke up, unable to keep her secret anymore, “We’ll be there cheering the Breakers on from one of the lower level suites. In case it’s too hot and we need to go into the air conditioning.”

“You will be?!” Ashlyn was so excited she swerved the truck a little bit as she turned to look at her wife in the passenger seat.

“As long as you don’t kill us all first” Whitney commented from the back seat with a smirk and then a smile.

“I was going to surprise you, but if you have people you want to meet him...”

“Oh my God, this is awesome” the keeper choked out emotionally. “This is the best weekend ever.”

Tobin, Kling and Allie did indeed venture up to the big old house the next morning to visit with Drew and then boogie board on Good Harbor beach for a couple of hours with Ashlyn, Whitney and Jen. And Ali did indeed bring the baby, dressed in his tiny ‘Harris’ keeper’s jersey, to the game that afternoon. It was hot and the brunette felt bad taking the jersey off before the first fifteen minutes of the match, but she hoped the Breakers onesie would suffice. If it got too hot they would go back into the air-conditioned interior of the suite to watch the game. The nervous first time mom had taken all the precautions she could think of and relied on Sydney and Deb to help her fill in any missing pieces. She wore him on her chest in a baby wrap most of the time, with noise-canceling headphones on him to protect his tiny ears. Knight-Harris had purchased one of the lower level suites for the season so they could host and entertain clients and potential clients at the Breakers and Revolution games. Ali liked these 16-20 person suites because they were only ten rows from the pitch instead of way high up like the fancier grandstand suites. She liked to be close to the action. The suite was full that day. Ken and Vicki and Tanner had come to the game, as had Sydney, Dom, Cash and Sandi. Kyle had come up to spend the 4th of July and weekend with Nathan and they were both there. Most of the K-H employees were there and of course Deb too. Ali often brought her friends when there was room. Sarah and Erin had season tickets down in the stands and they regularly joined Ali and Sydney in the suite. But that was not going to happen that day because they were at max capacity.

The brunette knew the cameras would be looking for a shot of Ashlyn’s new baby. Lifetime TV had already contacted K-H about doing an interview with the keeper to talk about the adjustment she would need to make with a new baby in her life. Ashlyn said she would be happy to do an interview like that, but not for a few months. She needed to focus on soccer and her family right now. But Ali understood that the longer they waited to show the fans their bundle of joy, the more aggressive they were going to get to try and get a picture of him. After Ashlyn’s thank you picture of Ali and Drew became popular at the end of the World Cup the week before, the blonde had posted it on her social media accounts as sort of their informal birth announcement. The brunette would have preferred a picture of Ashlyn and the baby, but what was done was done and there was no taking it back. So she planned ahead and had Drew, in his mama’s jersey, unwrapped enough so the camera could pick him out and get a good shot during the player announcements and the singing of the national anthem. And that was all they were getting. Her plan worked perfectly and they put the shot up on the jumbotron and the whole stadium cooed at the baby. Ashlyn turned around and blew a kiss up to her family and everyone awwed again. Her popularity had increased tremendously since her work on the World Cup. This was the Breakers’ first game back after the break and you could feel the difference in the way the fans reacted to her.

About halfway through the first half Steven Dudley, his wife and two teenage daughters visited the suite to pay their respects to the newest Krieger. Steven raved to Deb and Ken about their daughter
and explained how proud he was of her success with her new company, even though it had been difficult to see her leave his company. No sooner had they left the suite than Bob Kraft and his son Jonathan joined them for a visit and a peek at little Drew. Bob greeted Ali warmly with a hug and a kiss as she introduced him to her parents. The billionaire complimented the brunette on the new office space for Knight-Harris and praised her to the rafters as he spoke to Deb and Ken. Just then the crowd erupted and they all jerked their heads over to the pitch but they had missed the play. They impatiently waited for the replay on the jumbotron and oohed with the rest of the stadium as they watched Ashlyn make an incredibly acrobatic save on a laser shot from Lindsey Horan just inside the box.

“I don’t think there’s another keeper in the league who makes that save” Jonathan Kraft said as he shook his head in amazement, watching another replay. He was the real soccer fan in the Kraft family and he was the one who handled most of the Revs business matters. “Unbelievable.”

“I think you’re right” Ken agreed proudly.

The game ended in a 2-2 draw but it had been more exciting than the final scoreline indicated. Ali knew her wife would be frustrated, but at least it was a point.

“Holding the Thorns to two goals is no small task” Ken commented wisely as they watched the players shake hands on the pitch.

“Their keeper isn’t that good” Sydney added. “Breakers need more scoring. They should have won this one.”

Ali saw her wife motion for her to come down to the pitch. She took Kyle with her, just to help ward off any unwanted attention from fans or weirdos and she was glad she did when they got closer to the field. Dozens of girls, all different ages, were screaming Ashlyn’s name as the keeper approached them at a jog. The keeper asked everybody to back up a bit so Ali could get through, and then carefully lifted her son out of the brunette’s wrap. She winked at her wife, who was staring at her nervously, and leaned over for a quick kiss.

“Good game babe” Ali yelled as they pulled apart so the blonde could hear her.

Ashlyn flashed her a dimpled grin as she nuzzled the baby to her chest and chin. Ali could see, in that moment, something she never thought she would witness. Ashlyn honestly couldn’t have cared less about the outcome of the match right then. All she cared about was the baby boy in her arms. Usually the keeper would need at least ten or twenty minutes to stew about a game like this one before she could go and greet the fans. Her focus was always white hot and it was always on winning. Maybe stepping away from the game and retiring, when it was time, wouldn’t be as hard for her wife as Ali had feared. The brunette let Kyle pull her back up the steps to the suite as she watched Ashlyn carry their son towards a group of Thorns players who were clearly eager to meet him. There were some Breakers players in the group as well. Ali stood between her mother and Sydney as the three women anxiously watched the blonde in the middle of the large group of players and coaches. They all knew she would give her life to protect little Drew, but they were all afraid her eagerness to show off the thing she was the most proud of in the entire world would make her do something silly, without thinking.

“I swear, Whitney is scanning that group to see if anybody’s sick” Deb chuckled as they all kept watching. “I love that girl so much.”

“Ash is doing good” Sydney offered with a slow nod of her head. “As long as she doesn’t...uh oh.”

“Take his headphones off” Ali finished with a frustrated groan. “Ash-lyn” she whined, in two-
syllable fashion as they watched the keeper lift the headphones off the baby’s head and slip them over her unoccupied forearm.

“Is she allowed to do that?” Kyle asked with a giggle from behind the row of frowning women.

Just as Ali was about to get upset, Ashlyn took her hand and ruffled the dark shock of hair on Drew’s head, letting it stand up in its’ normal condition, unhindered by the headphones.

“Oh my God” Ali chuckled. “She loves that gnome hair of his.”

The brunette rolled her eyes and the frowning women all giggled as the women on the pitch laughed along with Ashlyn as she kissed her son’s cheek. Whitney said something to the keeper and then put the headphones back onto his head. The stadium was quieter now that the game had ended and the public address guy had simmered down. But it was better to be safe than sorry. Right on cue, his booming voice echoed through the stadium, reminding folks to come back to the next home game a week away. Ashlyn turned to face the suite and took a second to locate her beautiful brunette. She waved at Ali and gave her a thumbs up, big dimpled grin on her face.

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“So what’s the verdict doc?” Ashlyn asked with a smile. “Can I keep her? Or do I need a new one?”

“Oh she’s got all the jokes” Dr. Comello laughed as she watched Ali smack her wife’s hip from her place on the examination table.

“Please don’t encourage her” the brunette groaned and then giggled, despite her best efforts not to.

Ashlyn took Ali’s hand and squeezed it as she grinned down at her, eyes full of mischief and love. The brunette blinked back up at her and squeezed back.

“Things look good” the doctor said as she lifted Ali’s feet out of the stirrups, one at a time, and motioned for her to sit up. “You were in really good shape before you got pregnant and you kept exercising throughout your pregnancy so those are two reasons why you’re doing so well now. Also, it was your first pregnancy and moms tend to bounce back faster after their first baby. And, as hard as it was, your delivery was normal, without any complications. So you are the poster child for a first-time new mom.”

“But I haven’t done anything for almost two months” Ali commented. “I stopped after the due date because I was just too aggravated and uncomfortable.”

“Ali, that’s perfectly fine. And you’re not supposed to do anything but let your body heal for the first 6 weeks. Don’t get sucked in by what anybody else is saying or doing or tweeting. Your body needed this time to rest and heal and recover. Back in the day, new moms were basically locked in their homes with their babies until they were three months old. Trust me, six weeks is nothing” Patty explained with another chuckle.

“But now I can start working out, right?”

“Yes, as long as you promise me that you won’t overdo it” she quirked an eyebrow at her patient. “I’m serious. Just start slow and work up to whatever level you’re normally at. Your body is still recovering and you don’t want to do anything to cause a setback. Do you still have the postpartum exercise regimen I gave you?”

“Yes.”
“Good. Stick to it. Don’t do anything that’s not on there until our next appointment. Understood?”

“Understood.”

“Can I get a copy of that doc?” Ashlyn asked. “Just in case she loses hers or something.”

The doctor grinned and went to a drawer and started leafing through different handouts. She kept talking as she leafed.

“You should keep doing your kegels and you can massage the perineum area if you find that helpful. Some people do, some people don’t” she said over her shoulder. “How does everything feel? Are you still having pain?”

“No, not really. Just some discomfort every once in a while. I still get a bad cramp every so often. But nothing at all like a month ago, or even two weeks ago. These last two weeks I’ve really felt a difference.”

“Good” the doctor wheeled back over and handed Ashlyn the exercise regimen handout with a smile.

“Everything feels...loose” Ali tried to explain. “Like, things are still shifting around inside. Is that normal?”

“Absolutely” Patty confirmed. “That’s why I asked about the pain. If something starts hurting or is still hurting then we need to find out why. But sometimes some women don’t feel like their body is back to normal for a whole year. It’s different for everybody, and for every pregnancy. Just listen to your body and it will tell you what it’s ready for, and what it’s not.”

“How about lifting things, in general” Ashlyn asked. “Should she be carrying the laundry basket upstairs and things like that yet?”

“She can. As long as it feels ok. I get where you’re coming from Ashlyn, I really do. But you’re going to have to trust Ali on this stuff. There aren’t hard and fast rules. She’s smart” the doctor gave a stern look to the patient, “she won’t take unnecessary risks or make foolish decisions about her health. She knows your baby, and you, need her at her best.”

The doctor stood and moved to the other side of the table.

“And the breastfeeding is going well? No trouble with milk supply or anything like that?”

“No, he’s doing great. Gaining weight like a champ” Ali said proudly. “But my nipples are really sore and my breasts are always tender. There’s not really anything I can do about that though, right?”

“Not too much, unfortunately. You can take some Tylenol for the pain and sometimes that helps. And the nipples are going to be sore. Watch out when he starts teething too.” She chuckled when she saw both their faces go pale. “Pure lanolin oil helps on your nipples, some women swear by putting cold teabags around them too. A lot of women say if you dunk them in a big bowl of warm water it really gives some relief for your overworked nipples.”

“When will I get my period again?” Ali read off of her list of questions.

“That’s a big mystery. If you’re breastfeeding for a whole year, you may not get it until you’re done breastfeeding. Sometimes it comes back while you’re still breastfeeding. Some women get it the very next month after delivery, especially if they’re not breastfeeding. There’s no way to
predict it, other than to say that women who breastfeed don’t get their period as soon as women who don’t.”

“And, um, what about sex?” the brunette looked down shyly at the piece of paper in her hands.

“That’s up to you, of course” Patty smiled at Ali and then at Ashlyn. “Your body will let you know when it’s ready for sex. Some women don’t feel like having sex for up to a year. Their libidos just don’t bounce back and their sex drive takes more time. What I can tell you is that, physically, your body is able to have sex again without causing any damage to any sensitive areas internally. It will probably feel different, to both of you, because your vagina just pushed a baby through it six weeks ago. So be patient. Take your time. Try not to get frustrated. Oh, and sometimes when you breastfeed it can give you some vaginal dryness so don’t panic and think you’re broken.” She chuckled a bit. “Use some lube if you need to. As soon as you stop breastfeeding it should go away. But before you even think about trying to have sex, make sure you want to. Make sure you can still light the flame before you try to build the fire.”

“That’s not a problem” Ali answered and quickly turned beet red.

“Well then yes, you have a green light. Just try not to be too rough at first and have fun.”

Ali and Ashlyn stood at the check-in desk at the Marriott hotel near Ali’s old house in Stoneham. The keeper remembered that it was the hotel that Deb and Mike Christopher used to stay at when they visited the brunette so she knew it would be nice enough for her wife. Ashlyn had made the reservation after their sexy soak in the tub six days earlier. She had been optimistic and wanted to be prepared. She had packed a bag with some extra clothes, just in case, and she had told Deb that she was going to try and take Ali out for dinner after their late afternoon appointment. God bless Deb. She thought it was a wonderful idea and loved spending time with Drew, especially when she knew his parents would be home after dinner.

“I can’t believe you did this” Ali whispered as they stood next to each other in the elevator. “I love it.”

Ashlyn set up her portable speaker and pushed play on one of their favorite sexy times playlists as she waited for her wife to come out of the bathroom. She was excited and more than a little nervous. She wanted this to go well for Ali more than anything. The brunette wanted to have sex with her, she had admitted that in the doctor’s office and it had taken all of Ashlyn’s willpower to keep from pumping her fist right there in the exam room. But she knew her wife was insecure about her postpartum body and probably scared about sex causing her more pain. Ashlyn was going to go slow and treat her girl right, no matter how much Ali might urge her to go faster.

“Everything ok baby?” she asked, standing just outside the bathroom door and knocking lightly.

“Yeah.” Ali’s voice was tentative.

“Can I come in?”

“Yeah, ok.”

Ashlyn was surprised to find her beautiful brunette standing there naked, looking at her reflection in the big mirror over the sink. She was chewing her bottom lip and twirling some of her long dark locks with her fingers.

“I was going to take all my clothes off but I didn’t want you to feel pressured into anything” the keeper said after getting over her surprise. “And here you are, naked and gorgeous already.”
And the look in Ashlyn’s eyes was all it took to shake Ali out of her nervous pause. She knew her wife wasn’t faking it for her benefit. She knew the keeper’s lust was real just by looking at her darkening eyes in the mirror. Ashlyn didn’t care that her pregnancy pouch hadn’t gone all the way away yet. She didn’t care about any of that and Ali had never felt more loved in her entire life. Ali smiled at her wife in the mirror and tilted her head just a bit to the side, lowering her eyes for a second and then bringing them back up and blinking. She turned and stepped closer to the blonde, grabbing the hem of her t-shirt and slowly lifting it over her head. She unbuttoned her shorts and Ashlyn pulled her sports bra off as they stared into each other’s eyes. The keeper swallowed hard and pushed her shorts and boxer briefs down over her hips, trying to shimmy them down so she wouldn’t have to break eye contact and bend down to remove them. Ali stepped into her wife and wrapped her arms around her neck, pulling her down into a slow, deep kiss. Ashlyn wound her arms around her wife’s waist and pulled her closer as they kissed, slowly running her hands up her back and down over her ass.

“Let’s go get more comfortable and see what happens” the blonde suggested when they broke the kiss for air.

“Ash” the brunette leaned her forehead against her wife’s and closed her eyes for a second. “I want this. I want you. I’m nervous and I don’t want to disappoint you, but please don’t doubt how much I want this.”

Ashlyn brought both of her hands to Ali’s face and held it gently, stroking her cheeks with her thumbs as she spoke.

“God, Al, the idea that you could ever disappoint me...” she shook her head. “It could never happen honey. Ever. I love you and nothing we do here is going to change that. And I love having sex with you and nothing we do here is going to change that either. So, please don’t be nervous about me. I know your body is still changing and I can’t imagine how weird that must feel. But that just makes me love you even more. You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen and you turn me on like I never even knew was possible. I’m so excited to touch you and taste you and love you. I’m the one who’s nervous that I won’t be able to keep it together long enough to even make you feel good” she chuckled. “But if I do mess up, I know you’ll still love me anyway. Right?”

Ali leaned forward and kissed her wife hard, unable to resist all of the sweet, heartfelt sentiments. Ashlyn started backing out of the bathroom, bringing the brunette, still attached to her lips, with her as she moved towards the bed. The keeper sat down on the foot of the bed when she backed into it and Ali got on her lap, straddling her as they kept kissing. Ashlyn moved her hands to her wife’s ass and moaned as she grabbed two handfuls, not quite as forcefully as she normally would have. She would rather err on the side of caution this afternoon, no matter what else happened. Ali moaned back and cupped the blonde’s breasts, working them up until her nipples were stiff and then flicking them with her thumbs.

“Jesus, you feel good” Ashlyn husked out when they broke the kiss to breathe.

The brunette dragged her lips down the keeper’s neck, licking and sucking her way to her pulse point. She pushed Ashlyn back against the bed and then let her mouth continue sucking its’ way down to her breasts and nipples. Ali spent a long time on those pretty pink nipples, loving the way her wife moaned and writhed underneath her. She loved the way her skin felt up against the blonde’s soft skin. She loved the way Ashlyn’s hands felt on her ass. The brunette sat up, pleased with the work she had done, and smirked at her keeper. Ashlyn’s face was flushed and her eyes were dark and hazy with desire. She whimpered when she felt Ali moving away from her, missing her smooth skin all over her torso. She lifted her head off the bed to see where her wife had gone
and moaned again when she saw her kneeling on the floor at the foot of the bed, licking her lips. The brunette pulled the keeper closer to the edge of the bed and then pushed her legs out wide, opening her pussy up and making her own head spin with want.

“Fuck Ash” she swallowed hard and licked her lips again. “You’re so fucking wet.”

“That’s what you do to me sexy” Ashlyn replied, her voice low and thick. “That’s what you’ve always done to me.”

Ali had thought about this moment for six days, and so far, not one part of it had gone the way she had imagined it. Instead of teasing her gorgeous wife by taking her time and kissing up and down each of her long legs, Ali just pressed her face right into Ashlyn’s folds and started licking every inch of sweet flesh she could reach.

“Mmmmmmm” she moaned into her wife’s core.

The blonde propped herself up on her elbows to watch Ali eating her out. It felt incredible and she knew she was too worked up to last very long. The brunette was so good with her mouth.

“Fuck, that’s hot” Ashlyn groaned.

Ali reached up and traced a circle around her clit, then another one, and another, gradually tightening the circle until her finger was right on the sensitive nub. She started rubbing it back and forth as she thrust her strong tongue inside Ashlyn’s hot center. The brunette felt her wife’s leg quiver next to her head and knew she was getting close to the edge. She felt her keeper’s walls starting to tighten as she continued to plunge her tongue as deep as she could. She straightened up and sucked her way up to Ashlyn’s clit, lapping at the nub with her tongue as she pushed two fingers inside her wife.

“Unnhhh, Jesus, yes baby…”

Ali started thrusting her fingers hard and fast inside the blonde’s pussy. She sucked on her clit, hard, and flicked it with her strong tongue until Ashlyn grunted and then came with a string of curse words. Her body shook as she tumbled over the edge, riding out the orgasm and breathing hard. The brunette pulled her fingers from her core and licked them clean as she watched her wife’s body slowly stop twitching. She dropped her head down to lick up all of her wife’s passion from the tops of her toned thighs.

“Wow” Ashlyn finally managed to say as her breathing got back to normal. “That felt incredible. God damn.”

Ali chuckled and pressed a warm kiss to her keeper’s entrance.

“Hey now” the blonde jumped at the contact, much too sensitive. “Come up here and kiss me.”

Ali crawled up the bed, holding her sore breasts in one hand as she went, and lay down on her side next to her wife. Ashlyn turned to face her and they kissed for several minutes.

“Thank you baby, that was awesome” the keeper enthused with a big grin.

“The pleasure was all mine, believe me” Ali replied with a smirk.

She repositioned herself and winced again as her swollen breasts knocked together.

“Do you want me to go get your bra?” Ashlyn offered sweetly. “That helps support them and gives
you a little bit of relief, right?"

“Yeah, I also need to pump or nurse pretty soon. That’s part of the problem too.” She watched her wife walk to the bathroom to retrieve her large nursing bra for her. “I’m sorry honey.”

“Ali, don’t be sorry” the keeper said as she held the bra out and helped her wife into it. “This is supposed to feel good, and if those beauties are not feeling good then we need to help them out. Or in, in this case.” She giggled and kissed the brunette’s lips as she finished getting her bra on and in the correct position. “Are you doing ok?”

“Yeah, I am.” Ali looked at her beautiful wife kneeling next to her. “I’m still nervous but I don’t want to chicken out.”

“Do you know what you want? What you think will feel good to start with?”

“I think I might need the lube” she blushed and dropped her eyes. “I’m glad Patty said that about the dryness and the breastfeeding. I totally thought it was just me.”

“I didn’t think to bring any lube” Ashlyn answered softly. “I’m sorry. But, as you’ve already cleverly pointed out, I’ve got lots to spare” she grinned at her self-conscious wife. “I was thinking I could just use my own juices to lube up my finger and try that, nice and slow, and see how that feels. What do you think?”

“Yeah, ok, let’s try it” Ali agreed. “Where do you want me?”

“Whatever is most comfortable baby. I’ll work around you, no matter where that is.”

They took a few minutes and got the brunette propped up on a bunch of pillows against the headboard. She was at a little bit of an angle but the position felt good for her when she pulled her knees up. They kissed again, playfully at first, but then more passionate and hungry. Ashlyn’s hands started to roam down her wife’s body and she let her mouth follow them between Ali’s hips and across her mound. The brunette flinched a little bit and the keeper moved back up to safer ground.

“You ok?” she asked softly, between kisses to Ali’s belly.

“MmmHmm.”

“Al, be honest with me. You’re not going to hurt my feelings. Tell me what you want and that’s exactly what I’ll do sweetheart.”

Ali closed her eyes and let out a frustrated sigh.

“I want to have sex with you without having to orchestrate every last thing” she whined.

“And we will” Ashlyn’s voice was strong and confident. “But not right now. Not this first time.” She paused and gazed at her wife’s frowning face. “Do you know what you’re afraid of, like specifically? Have you had an orgasm yet, since the baby?”

“No” she replied softly, “no orgasm yet” she reached down and took her keeper’s hand in hers. “I think I’m afraid the thrusting will hurt.”

“Ok” Ashlyn kissed her hand. “Then how about we just try one finger and what if I just curl it up instead of pumping it? And I’ll suck on your clit and make sure you have a nice orgasm to start with. How about that?”
“Ok” Ali answered in a small voice. “Thank you for being so good to me all the time Ash.”

“I love you. I’d do anything in the world for you honey.”

And that’s what they did. Ashlyn didn’t get to take her time and spend most of it with her mouth between Ali’s legs. Her plan had not come to fruition either. But that was ok. That afternoon was all about her wife. And her breasts were killing her and she needed to get home and pump sooner rather than later. C’est la vie. So the keeper was as gentle as she had ever been with anyone. She lay on her side next to Ali’s hip so she could keep a close eye on her face and read her reaction to what she was doing as she curled her long finger inside her. Ashlyn tried to hit her g-spot and felt like she was doing a good job, based on the moans and pants coming from Ali’s mouth. She licked and sucked on her clit and the brunette asked her for more pressure there and she obliged with several more long hard flicks. It took longer than usual but Ashlyn knew it was because her beautiful wife was completely in her head about it. She was tense and uptight and neither of those things led to good sex or even good orgasms.

“Baby, trust me” she finally pleaded with her nervous wife. “I’ll catch you honey, I promise. Go ahead and let go.”

Ali brought her hand down and started rubbing her own clit, just the way she needed it. She squeezed Ashlyn’s hand with her free hand and arched her back as she climbed. The keeper continued to curl her strong finger up and moved her mouth over to Ali’s knee and licked and sucked the flesh there. It didn’t take long after that for the brunette to reach her peak and come down the other side, twitching and shaking through her medium sized orgasm as she tried to hold onto her breasts to keep them from shaking.

“Oh... Ashlyn...yessssss...” she shouted when she finally came.

To her great relief, and she sheepishly explained this to her keeper as they drove home shortly thereafter, she had managed to maintain control of all of her bodily functions when she came. Her orgasm didn’t hurt, quite the contrary – it felt great, and it didn’t cause her to experience a bunch of painful uterine contractions as a result.

“And you said you were worried about the thrusting” Ashlyn challenged. “I knew you were in your head about something but I had no idea you were worried about all of that.” She shook her head and frowned. “I wish you had told me.”

Ali could see the frustration and disappointment on her wife’s face as she focused on the road in front of her.

“Well, there wasn’t anything you could do about any of it” she shrugged. “What was the point?”

“Sometimes it helps just to tell somebody you trust what you’re afraid of” Ashlyn explained carefully. It had been an emotional afternoon and she didn’t want to make a big deal out of it. But the keeper was hurt that her wife couldn’t tell her what she was really afraid of. “Just saying the words sometimes makes you feel better about it.”

They drove on in silence for a while.

“Are you mad at me?” Ali questioned in a quiet voice.

“No, of course not honey” the blonde replied with a quick smile. “I guess I just feel... left out.” It was the best she had been able to come up with as she had been driving and thinking about what was bothering her. “We’re a team, and a damned good one, and... I don’t know.” She stopped and
shook her head again.

“Tell me Ash” the brunette asked softly and reached her hand over the console so her wife could hold it.

“It felt like you didn’t trust me with it. And that hurt a little bit.”

Ali knew that if Ashlyn was talking about it like this that it had hurt her a lot more than a little bit. She felt a pang of guilt and then anger and then more guilt. Who was she mad at? Ashlyn or herself or her stupid uterus? She was just about to pull her still-empty hand back when her keeper took it in her own and squeezed it.

“But today was a big deal and we were both nervous and we’ll do better next time. That’s all” the blonde gave her quiet wife a small smile and squeezed her hand again.

“I do trust you though. With everything” Ali said solemnly after a few more minutes of silence. “I’m sorry babe.”

“It’s ok” the keeper gave her a bigger smile this time, buoyed by hearing that she really did still trust her. “I probably shouldn’t have surprised you with something this important. That was not the best idea I’ve ever had. You needed time to plan it out and get your head right and I should have realized that.”

“Will you please stop apologizing for things?” Ali chuckled and leaned over so she could kiss Ashlyn’s hand. “I thought it was really sweet of you to make those plans for us. And I think being out of the house was a good idea too because I would have been worried about being interrupted or having to feed him. It was a good plan Ash. Thank you for being so sweet and thoughtful. It means more to me than you’ll ever know.”
They didn’t try to have sex again for a while. Not until the end of the month when Ashlyn took Ali up to Ogunquit, ME for a night to celebrate her birthday. In the meantime the Breakers had played four more games in the busy month of July. Taking the entire month of June off for the World Cup meant lots of games crammed into the rest of the schedule. The Breakers, as did most of the other NWSL teams, had five games each month for the rest of the season. In addition, Ashlyn’s June was originally supposed to include two separate soccer camps that went four days each. She had to reschedule them when she got the ESPN gig for the World Cup. They rescheduled the eight days of camps as single days, on the Sundays after Saturday home games in July, August, September and October. Those would normally be recovery days for the keeper so it was a good way to kill two birds with one stone. Not that Ashlyn wanted to kill birds. And she really enjoyed doing those camps. She loved interacting with kids and she fed off of their enthusiasm.

Marcy was put in charge of the red tape and logistics for all the camps since Ali was on maternity leave. Marcy brought the new intern, Paula, with her and they got all the kids registered and t-shirted and off to their assigned groups at each camp. Marcy Hopkins had come to Knight-Harris in April of 2018, right at the same time they moved the business out to the garage. She was a classmate of Jared’s at Emerson College in Boston and she had turned out to be just as hard-working and dedicated as he was. She started out answering phones and doing office work for the company. Everything came in to her and she made sure the right person received whatever the information was so it could get taken care of quickly and correctly. She lived in an apartment in Arlington and was thrilled that the new offices in Cambridge had opened. Her commute time went from 45 minutes to about 20 minutes if she took the subway or bus. If she drove herself it was closer to 15 minutes depending on how many red lights she hit on Mass Ave. She was nice-looking but not a real beauty. She was average height with an average build and an average wardrobe. She was straight and single and she loved sports. She had never played many once she got to high school. She was a music nerd who had a gorgeous singing voice but never figured out what to do with it. She was quiet and liked to hang around in the background. Being front and center made her uncomfortable but she could do it if she had to. The joke was that it was such a waste that she was single because she would make the best girlfriend in the world for some sports loving guy. She was never happier than in NFL football season. She ran her own all-women’s fantasy football league and it was serious business to all ten of the ladies involved. Ali kept waiting patiently for someone to drop out of the group so she could join. Marcy was smart too. She was the kind of smart where she could learn whatever you needed her to do and then, after only a short time, do it really well. Ali liked her immediately and grew to trust her more all the time. She gave her more responsibility and encouraged her to find her own, more confident voice. She didn’t seem interested in becoming an agent but she was too talented to be just the office manager, which was her current position as of 2019. Ali thought, and hoped, that Marcy could become her own personal assistant and gal Friday. Jared was wonderful, but his interests lay in social media and web content and things like that. He was perfectly capable of handling the day to day management of the business but he didn’t like it. It wasn’t his passion. One of the things Ali had learned while getting her MBA was how important it was to challenge the people you worked with and keep them interested and passionate about their jobs. Jared was the Director of Media and that was where his focus should always be. The shareholders had decided, just before Ali had the baby, that they would hire two new office assistants and two new agents before the end of the year. Ali wanted to wait on the agents until September, but she wanted to hire at least one office assistant right away so Marcy would have more time to do some of Ali’s job that summer.

Marcy was promoted to Executive Assistant and got a raise and was in charge of training the new office assistant, Wendy Bucasevic, who was hired in May once the new offices were up and
running. They also hired a summer intern from Ali’s newest alma mater, Northeastern University. Paula Curdo had just finished her junior year and was studying sports management and sports therapy. She was a tall, athletic co-ed with long brown hair and deep green eyes. She was beautiful with long, toned legs and big breasts. She caught everybody’s eye when she entered a room, and she knew it. Thankfully, she dressed appropriately and wasn’t constantly popping out of revealing, low-cut blouses. She seemed to take her work seriously, whether it was on the sports therapy side or in the sports management world. Ali almost didn’t hire her. Something about her made the brunette wary but she couldn’t find anything wrong with her resume and experience. Her only fault was being young and beautiful. It didn’t seem fair to exclude her for that and, ultimately, Ali decided to support Northeastern and try to help out another young woman in a male-dominated field. Paula was trained alongside Wendy on the office aspects of the job. Jerry Fuller, Julian Edelman’s agent, was only too happy to let her shadow him for a couple of weeks. And Paige Dandreo did the same thing for her when she met with athletes, clients and prospective clients.

Paige was gay and, if Ali had been paying more attention, she would have arranged for Paula to shadow Jen Tucker instead. Jen was straight and in a long-term relationship. There was no sense looking for trouble if it could just as easily be avoided. Jared could not have cared less about the new intern. He was gay so her feminine wiles were wasted on him and she wasn’t interested in what he did so she spent very little time with him in the office. Marcy, Jerry and Paige had all given Ali good reports on her, specifically calling out her intelligence and desire to learn. Maybe the brunette had been wrong about her after all. And honestly, Ali was only half paying attention that June anyway. She was on maternity leave and so tired she barely knew what day it was so as long as the new intern wasn’t pissing anybody off she was happy.

Ali got her first, real look at the new intern in action when she stopped by Ashlyn’s second soccer camp, a week after the Portland game. The camps were held in different locations each time so kids from different areas had a chance to attend. The first one had been in the western suburbs, two were scheduled for down on the South Shore, one was going to be up in southern NH, and two others were scheduled for the North Shore. Two, including the one that day, were going to be held at the new soccer stadium itself in Cambridge. The brunette and Sydney had decided to make a day of it so they loaded up their sons and drove to Cambridge. They shopped and went to lunch. They crashed at Ali’s office for a little break and so Cash could nap. Then they went over to the stadium to see how the camp was going. Ali was eager to see how Marcy and the intern were handling things in her absence. Ashlyn had told her that everything went well at the first camp but the brunette wanted to see it with her own eyes. She may be on maternity leave but she was not going to let the company she worked so hard for fall apart on her watch. It was a hot and humid day and the best friends were looking forward to getting out of the sweltering sun for a little bit before venturing down onto the sidelines. Ali had quadruple clearance to move around the stadium. She was a VIP suite lessee, she was a longtime friend of the Breakers and NWSL agent, she was a personal friend of Bob Kraft, and she was married to one of the stars of the team. It was 4pm and the camp was just starting to wrap up as they stood there in the suite guzzling cold bottles of water and watching the campers work through their final drills. All that was left was about thirty minutes of scrimmage and then cool down and that would be the end. Ali smiled and waved to Marcy who had looked up from her spot on the sideline when Ali texted her to check in. The brunette scanned the sideline area for Paula but didn’t see her. She sent a quick text to Marcy who turned to look at the suite again and pointed to the players bench area. The new intern was sitting in the shade with her long legs stretched across two other seats and her head buried in her phone.

The two young mothers sat in the outdoor part of the suite and talked while they watched Ashlyn interact with the kids and get the scrimmage started. Drew had decided he was hungry now, even though Ali had tried to feed him at the office before they left. She pulled out the wrap carrier that she liked to use and put it on before settling her seven week old son into it and against her nipple. Ali kissed his head, chuckled at his gnome hair and covered his head loosely with a privacy
blanket to protect him from the sun. Marcy went out and helped ‘coach’ one of the two teams during the scrimmage. She was a top-notch sports fanatic who knew a lot about many sports, even though she hadn’t played very many. Marcy was always helpful and Ashlyn appreciated having her there.

“Have you made any progress on your love/hate affair with soccer?” Sydney asked after about fifteen minutes of idle chatter. Neither woman took their eyes off of the field as they talked. “You don’t have to answer that you know.”

“Oh I don’t keep anything from you boo” Ali chuckled. “You know that.” She took another drink of water. “Mattie and I decided to hold off until I had more time to devote to it. Last year wasn’t great timing and, so far, this year hasn’t been either.”

“Ok. Just checking. I’ve been trying to get you to come help with my girls for years now. I’m just saying” the coach cocked her head and glanced sideways at Ali. “No pressure or anything” she giggled when she saw the brunette roll her eyes and grin back at her.

“Yeah, no pressure at all. Right.” They were quiet for a few more minutes as they listened to the excited voices of the campers and their parents, cheering from the sidelines. “I’ll do it” Ali said quietly, with a determined look. “I want to be able to be out there.”

“So you can coach your son’s team” Sydney smiled warmly at her best friend.

“Definitely” Ali agreed, eyes still on the pitch as the teams came together in one big huddle to end the camp. “But also so I can be with her. We both love soccer so much and we’re both soccer players inside, but I’ve never shared any of that with her.” She chewed her bottom lip as she tried to explain. “She’s the soccer player and I’m the wife. I mean, I know nobody will ever see me as an athlete...”

“That’s the first thing I think of when I’m about to describe you to someone” Sydney interrupted. “I almost say the words I always used to say ‘she’s a beast on the pitch, fast as hell, fearless, one of the best defensive backs you’ll ever see’.”

“Well, you know what I mean. And thanks” she smiled at Sydney and they shared a moment together. “But it’s her world now. And I don’t want to take anything away from her or pull her out of it...I just...I want to share soccer with her, somehow.”

“That makes sense to me Als.”

“I’d better call Mattie. There’ll never be time for it if I don’t make time for it” she sighed heavily. She picked the baby up and offered him to the coach for burping. Sydney squealed as she held him and tried to coax a burp from him. She leaned down and inhaled deeply.

“God that almost makes me want to have another one” the coach smiled and closed her eyes as she patted Drew’s back.

“Really?” Ali asked and quirked her eyebrow.

“Really” Sydney admitted. “I missed having a brother or a sister growing up and I’m worried he will too.” She looked over her shoulder at Cash who was napping again in his stroller. “I don’t know, we’re talking about it.”

“I’m happy for you, either way Syd. You know that. And if you don’t have another one Cash will always have Drew as a brother.”
They smiled at each other as the baby finally burped and Ali took him back and offered him her other breast, which he greedily took.

“Little piggy” Sydney giggled as she watched the adorable baby start to nurse. “What about you guys? I know you want more but have you thought about the timing?”

“Well you look good girl” Sydney playfully grabbed Ali’s waist and squeezed her bicep and pinched her thigh.

“Ow” Ali giggled. “I’m finally feeling like myself again, thank God.”

“Yeah, well, you don’t have your body back until you want sex and can actually enjoy it. That’s the real indicator right there. Nobody will tell you that either.” The coach slapped her own knee and squinted at the brunette. “And how is that going? You lovebirds probably had sex at three weeks or something crazy like that didn’t you?”

They were quiet as they watched Ashlyn pose for twenty-four different pictures with twenty-four different campers and their families. Marcy tried to wrangle things and maintain some sort of order in the chaos. Ali chewed her lip as she stared.

“It’s ok Alibaba” Sydney said softly and squeezed her arm. “You’ll figure it out. There’s no time limit on any of it. Just because your doctor cleared you doesn’t mean you have to do it until you’re ready. It’s ok to be nervous.” She paused for a minute, studying the brunette’s anxious face. “But it’s not as bad as you think it’s going to be. I will promise you that. And it gets better every time after.”

Ali spent the next ten minutes giving Sydney the blow by blow of their afternoon in the hotel and the hurt feelings that followed her first, pretty good, postpartum orgasm.

“So, why are you all sad-eyed and mopey? What am I missing?”

“I don’t know” Ali was self-conscious. “It’s just that...I’ve never not trusted her in bed, not ever. And I was so scared that I ended up shutting her out and she could tell and I really hurt her.”

“It’s not funny Syd.”
“I know it’s not. But I’m not wrong.”

They watched the campers pose for one big group picture and then start to file out of the stadium, huge smiles on everyone’s faces. Paula got up and walked over to join Ashlyn and Marcy. She wore shorts that made her legs look ten miles long and a camp t-shirt that was snug fitting but not too tight. She looked gorgeous in the late afternoon sun. The keeper was trying to stretch her back out and had bent all the way over as she talked with her two co-workers. She had tweaked her back in the game the night before as she stretched out to make a diving save and landed on somebody’s foot.

“So how did it go the second time?”

“We haven’t tried again yet” Ali said shyly.

“Who the fuck is that?” Sydney asked, her eyes bugging out, as she watched Paula interact with Ashlyn and Marcy.

“The new intern. Paula.”

“What the hell did you hire her for? Are you crazy?”

Neither of them could take their eyes off of the leggy intern as she stood close to Ashlyn with her hands on her hips. She bent over to talk to the keeper who was still in that same position, bent over at the waist with her hands almost touching the ground. Paula stood back up and put her hand on Ashlyn’s lower back as she held the position. The blonde’s camp t-shirt had slid forward as she bent over so Paula’s hand was on Ashlyn’s bare skin. Marcy watched with an unreadable look on her face as Paula moved behind the keeper and put both hands on her lower back and started to massage it.

“She’s a double major. Sports management and sports therapy” Ali answered as her eyes narrowed.

Marcy spoke again and pointed up to the suite. Ashlyn stood up slowly with a huge dimpled grin on her face as she spotted her wife. She waved with both hands above her head and blew kisses. Paula didn’t move or stop what she was doing. She just concentrated on Ashlyn’s lower back and never looked anyplace else.

“For fuck’s sake Al” Sydney said seriously. “Get rid of her. And have sex with your wife.”

//

Ali had tried to have sex with her wife again but they hadn’t been able to get enough time and privacy to make it happen. The Breakers had two away games the next two weeks and that limited their time together significantly. The brunette tried not to get too worried about it. She and Ashlyn were good. She knew she hurt the blonde by keeping her fears bottled up that day in the hotel and she would just try and do better going forward. She had apologized, Ashlyn had made her peace with it and they had moved on. Well, Ali was trying to move on. She couldn’t tell if Paula’s behavior with her keeper had bothered her because she was overly sensitive about the not great first time postpartum sex or not. The brunette could have been upset just because some hot young co-ed had her hands all over her wife. Ali wished her hormones weren’t making her emotions so unpredictable. It made it hard to look at things critically and really figure out what she was feeling. She didn’t want to punish Paula just because she was hormonal. She would give her the benefit of the doubt and keep closer tabs on her for the next few weeks.

The day after she visited Ashlyn’s camp, Ali sent an email to both Marcy and Paula commending
them on the turnout and thanking them for their hard work. She also made sure to remind them that they were expected to stay engaged and active with the campers throughout the whole day. Ashlyn shouldn’t be expected to do the wrangling. Of course, the whole point of the email was to let Paula know that she needed to do better next time. Ali called Marcy directly and explained what she had been trying to accomplish with the email. She wasn’t being passive-aggressive, but she understood the benefits of gentle reminders in place of stern rebukes. She encouraged Marcy to manage the intern more directly. It would be good training for young Marcy as well. It wasn’t easy for everybody to manage someone else but it was time for Marcy to learn.

Those two weeks were filled with plenty of quality time spent with baby Drew. Ali could not believe how in love she was with her little boy. Yes, it was frustrating and exhausting at times, but what she got in return was so special that she knew she would do it all over again tomorrow. And that was saying something. Drew was two months old and chatting up a storm in baby-talk. His favorite facial expression was a goofy, lopsided grin and the brunette adored it. He was just beginning to reach for things. He had figured out how to grab with his fingers so it made sense that the next step would be to learn how to reach with his arm to get the thing that he wanted to grab. And, for the first time, he started supporting his own weight for a few seconds at a time if you stood him up on your lap. He was sleeping for about four hours at night and taking fewer or at least shorter naps during the day. Dr. Comello, who was a general practitioner with an ob/gyn and pediatric specialty, said he was right within all the norms for size and weight and that he appeared to be happy and healthy. The doctor set up her practice so she could take care of young mothers and families all in one place and her patients adored her for it.

Ali knew that her time that summer with her baby was going to be something she would remember her entire life and she wanted to do something to try and document it. Now that she was sleeping a bit more, although not nearly enough yet, the brunette started to feel more like herself and was ready to crush the new mommy thing. She and Ashlyn had taken a picture of her belly as soon as they found out she was pregnant, and then each month thereafter. They continued right up until the day her water broke and then switched to taking pictures of him every week in the same position and place in the big old house. They had chosen the spot in front of the kitchen door that opened out to the farmer’s porch next to the driveway. It was a cute little spot where there was a break in the kitchen counter on either side so it formed a little recess. They didn’t use that door very often but they had decided it was going to be where they kept track of their children’s growth once they were big enough to stand. It only made sense to take the weekly pictures there too, even though their baby was a long way away from standing. Ali dressed him in the same outfit each week and kept it simple so they could find something similar as he got older – dark blue shorts or pants and a pale orange t-shirt. The plan was to do a weekly picture for his first year and then revert to monthly once he stopped growing and changing so quickly. Neither mother was sure exactly what they were going to do with their pictures but they knew it would be something fun that they could always look back on, whether it was a photo album or a scrapbook or something else. They had been very good about filling in the ‘Baby’s 1st Year’ book they had received at the baby shower. They didn’t force any answers. If they couldn’t decide what his favorite toy was yet they would just wait until the answer was obvious. Deb encouraged them, even when it was almost too much to ask in the insanity of June, and told them they would appreciate it someday.

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“Can I ask you something?” Whitney’s voice came from her bed in the hotel room they were sharing in Chicago the last Saturday night in July.

“Shoot” Ashlyn replied from her own bed, it was late and they should have been sleeping.

“Dirty truth?” the defender challenged.
“I promise.”

“Is it time for me to move out?”

Ashlyn exhaled a heavy sigh but didn’t answer right away.

“I just can’t tell…” Whitney talked quietly, but quickly, as her nerves got the better of her. “I mean, sometimes I feel like it’s good that I’m there because I can help. But then sometimes I feel like I’m totally intruding…”

“Whit. Whitney. Whitney Elizabeth Engen” Ashlyn finally got through her best friend’s anxious rambling on the third try. “It’s not time for you to move out, unless you want to. I mean, for you, because you want to move in with Ryan or something…you know?”

“What?”

“Fuck. Why can’t I ever talk when it’s the important stuff?” the keeper muttered to herself. “The truth is I don’t want you to move out.” Her words were clear and concise and honest. “Ever. And I’m not kidding.”

“Ash…” Whitney chided.

“You were?”

“I swear to God Whit. That was the plan. We talked about it and it was a pretty easy thing to agree on. But then she got pregnant and she thought you might not want to live in a house with a baby and the more I thought about it the more I agreed. And we didn’t want to pressure you or make you feel like we were asking you so you could be our live-in nanny or something like that.”

Whitney giggled and rolled on her side to face the other bed.

“Well I know you wouldn’t expect that. You didn’t have to worry about that.”

“We both love living with you. That’s the fact. And that’s not just me. Ali loves you and she says you’re a good influence on me and that you can stay as long as you want. I’m not even kidding.”

“I love living with you guys too. I can’t believe it’ll be three years this September since Ali moved in.” The defender paused. “You promised to tell me when it was time for me to move out Ash. And I just can’t tell anymore.”

“The house is plenty big enough for all of us. As long as you don’t mind sharing it with a noisy baby, that is.” Ashlyn chuckled and rolled onto her side to face her best friend. “My official answer is ‘never’.”

Whitney chuckled and rolled her eyes in the dark.

“What are your plans with Ryan? How does he feel about everything?”

The defender sighed before she started to talk again.

“He thinks we should get our own place and I don’t blame him. I’d be uncomfortable if I were him too.”
“He’s uncomfortable around me?” Ashlyn asked.

“No, just, he’s the only guy and he doesn’t really know Ali at all and he only knows you a little...”

“Ali terrified him that night she lost her shit over the Instagram post nightmare. Didn’t she?”

“No” Whitney answered unconvincingly.

“She did, but that’s not really fair.” Ashlyn defended her wife, even though she didn’t need to.

“She’s never like that.”

“Ok, he’s a little afraid of her” Whitney admitted with a giggle as Ashlyn groaned. “I’ve told him a hundred times that she’s never like that. Just so you know.”

“Alright” the keeper sighed. “He’ll see soon enough, once he gets his butt to Boston so we can hang out together.” She took a minute and tried to get back to the original subject. “So what’s the plan then? After the wedding and your honeymoon?”

“He thinks he’s got a good shot at the assistant coaching job here with the Cannons next season. The assistant here now is moving to help with one of the new expansion teams as soon as the season’s done in September. The head coach knows Ryan’s interested and he remembers him from his last round of tryouts a few years ago. He told him that he played like a coach. Which, at the time, Ryan was offended by” Whitney laughed. “But now he thinks that’s a pretty good endorsement of his coaching skills.”

“So he’s done in September, you guys get married at the end of October, go to Hawaii for your honeymoon and then come back to Cali for the holidays or what?”

“Yes, pretty much. Unless he has to interview or something in there somewhere. Then he moves to Boston once he gets the job.”

“And you guys get your own place and I miss you like crazy for the rest of my life.”

“Drama queen.”

“You know it. Especially when it comes to my bestie leaving me.”

They were quiet for a while and Ashlyn thought the defender had fallen asleep. They were quiet for so long that Ashlyn was about to drift off herself when she heard Whitney speak again.

“I think next season will be my last.”

“What?!” Ashlyn was wide awake again. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m going to retire after next season.”

“Why? You still love it Whit. I know you do.”

“I do love it and that’s kind of part of it.” She took a deep breath. It had taken her all of that time to get the courage up to tell the keeper what she’d been trying to tell her all season. “I want to retire while I still love it. I don’t want to ever not love it, you know?”

“Yeah, but Whit, you’ll be 32 in November. You’ve got lots of time left. What’s the rush?”

“I want to go to law school. I’ve always wanted to do that and that’s three years right there. That puts me at 36 if I wait until after next season. Then I want to have kids and not when I’m in my
forties. There’s just no more time for soccer for me” she said sadly. “Not if I want to do these other things too.”

Silence filled the room again as Ashlyn pondered what life in the big old house would be like without Whitney. And what life with the Breakers would be like without her captain and best friend. She didn’t like the way either scenario looked and was about to protest again. But then she thought about it from the other side. She was lucky enough that her wife was having the baby so she could keep playing. Whitney didn’t have that luxury. And the defender had always talked about going to law school. She had applied and been accepted at four of the best law schools in the country when she graduated from UNC. She decided to put those dreams on hold while she followed her soccer dream instead. As the keeper thought more about it she realized that Whitney’s soccer life had always been temporary. Not that she gave it short shrift or paid it less attention than it needed or deserved. Whitney was the consummate professional and no-one would ever question her heart or her commitment to soccer, her teams or her teammates. She came from a brilliant family who revered intelligence, higher learning and the mind. Whitney didn’t want to become a lawyer for the big paycheck or the fancy clothes and cars and things like that. She wanted to help people who didn’t always get a fair chance because they couldn’t afford a good lawyer. That’s what she had always dreamed of doing with her big brain and her even bigger heart.

“I love you Whit. And I’m proud of you. And I know you’re going to do such good things with your life. I’ll miss you like crazy. But I’m so excited for you.”
Happy Birthday Ali

Chapter Notes

I'm laid up on the couch for a couple of days so I'm cheating and posting more chapters. Somebody stop me or I'll post the whole damned thing...

As she fed her son in the darkness, Ali smiled at the text from her wife. It was just after 2am on Sunday, July 28th, and she sat in her bed missing her keeper. The text had come in at midnight, as it always did if Ashlyn couldn’t be with her on her birthday to tell her in person.

Ashlyn: Happy Birthday to my beautiful bride. Another year more amazing. I love you and I can’t wait to see you this afternoon.

Ali used to love celebrating her birthday. She had nothing but wonderful memories of the day growing up. Her parents had made sure she felt special, no matter what age she was or what else was going on. Deb used to make her a birthday cake in the shape of whatever her age was that year. It would be big, on a half-size sheet cake pan, and she would plan it out so there were enough pieces of cake for however many friends were coming to the birthday party. Plus a few extra, just in case. Deb took coins, the cleanest ones she could find, and wrapped them in aluminum foil and then inserted them into the cake while it was baking and just firm enough to hold them in place. One coin per piece of cake so every kid got a quarter or a fifty-cent piece or a silver dollar if they were lucky. But one kid would get the special piece of cake that came with a button wrapped in aluminum foil instead. That lucky friend got the special prize which was usually a toy. The toy wasn’t too cool – they didn’t want to take attention away from Ali or Kyle’s presents, but it was cool enough so the Krieger kids’ friends were always excited and hopeful about finding the button. Ali couldn’t remember exactly when those cakes and parties had stopped happening. Sometime in middle school, she was sure, when she and her big brother had gotten too grown up for such silly things. She cringed as she thought back to those days and hoped she hadn’t been too unkind and bratty when she told her mother she didn’t want those cakes or parties any more. 35. How the fuck did she get to be 35 years old? She burped her beautiful boy and quietly put him back in the bassinet next to her bed. As she settled in for another four hours of sleep she promised herself that she would make cakes in the shape of her children’s ages and hide coins and buttons inside, whether they liked it or not. She had to make sure to ask her mother how to do it.

The day before they had all gathered at Ken & Vicki’s house in Ipswich to celebrate Ali’s 35th birthday with a cookout, swimming in the pool, a pick-up game of soccer, cake and ice cream. They made sure to watch Ashlyn’s game of the week on Lifetime TV at 4pm too. Sydney, Cash and Sandi were there but Dom had to work. Mike Christopher had arrived that morning to spend the week at the big old house with his wife and meet baby Drew, and both he and Deb were at the party too. Kyle got a hair dressing gig on a low-budget film in NYC so he and Nathan had been spending most of their weekends there so far that summer. The brunette missed her brother but was learning to be patient. She knew he was coming up for a week in September to bond with his nephew, as he called it. She couldn’t wait. Persey, Fred and Boss were all there but it was the first visit for most of the party-goers where they wouldn’t see Apollo. The sweet, giant dog had gotten old and sick and, in the hubbub of June when he had stopped eating altogether, Ken had to put him to sleep so he wasn’t suffering any more. Ken bent over and welcomed the dogs with pats and scratches when they ran to him, even fickle Boss knew Ken was worth the effort. As he
straightened up after several minutes, Ken cleared his throat and dealt with a flash of momentary grief for his recently departed pet. Vicki gave her husband a squeeze and then Ali gave him a big hug, after handing Drew to her step-mother.

“I miss him too” she said quietly to her father as she hugged him. “Thanks for letting me bring these guys” she nodded towards Persey and Fred who were still circling his legs and wagging their tails.

“It’s good to see them” Ken replied, his voice clipped as he tried not to cry. “It’s always good to have a dog in the house.”

Before the party was over that evening the brunette had made sure to have Vicki feed the baby and help her change him. Ali wanted to give Deb a break, but she also wanted to include her step-mother more. Vicki was so quiet sometimes that it was easy to overlook her and Ali was always sensitive to that. Somewhere in her four years of reflection and observation and solitude she had gained the ability to see those quiet people in a whole different light. Vicki really wanted to feed Drew and spend time with him but she would never have asked Ali to do it, especially not in a setting where Deb was present as well. The two women actually got along very well. They would never be best friends or anything but they shared a mutual appreciation. Deb was thankful that Vicki made Ken happy, and Vicki was happy that Deb had let him go so that she could find him and marry him. The party had been a lot of fun, and completely relaxing. Ali was extremely cautious of Drew in the sun, knowing that little babies and their skin were about as delicate as could be. He wore an adorable little shark sun hat and matching shark bathing outfit. It wasn’t just swim trunks anymore, not if you were doing it right to protect your baby’s sensitive skin. He wore a long-sleeved bathing shirt with his shark swim trunks that was designed to protect little babies. Ali dunked his chubby legs in the water as she walked around the shallow end of the inground pool with him in her arms. He giggled and then started kicking the water and laughing harder. It was really cute and the brunette was suddenly upset that Ashlyn wasn’t there to see their son’s first experience with the water. They hadn’t taken him to the beach yet because he was just too little. Dr. Comello recommended waiting until he was at least two months old so that was what they had done, but Ali knew it was killing her wife not to take him to the ocean with her. They were planning to take him with them when they went to the beach with Meg during her visit the first week of August. That would be soon enough. Sydney took a bunch of pictures of Drew’s first pool adventure and Ali selected a few that she liked and sent one to the keeper telling her they missed her.

“Lucy, I’m ho-ome!” Ashlyn yelled as she walked through the mudroom door the next day.

“Nice job Ricky” Whitney teased and pushed the keeper from behind as they both heard Drew start to cry from the living room.

“Damn” Ashlyn muttered, “I thought he’d be upstairs.”

It was about 1pm and Ali and Deb and Mike were in the living room watching golf. The baby had been sleeping on the couch between Ali and her mom.

“I’m sorry guys” the blonde apologized as she walked into the living room. She hugged Deb and Mike who both stood up to greet she and Whitney, then she handed her wife a small bouquet of flowers as she bent down and kissed her lips.

“Happy Birthday baby.”

“Mmmm” Ali hummed against her lips. “Thank you honey” she said as she looked at the pretty flowers.
“Here’s my sweet boy” Ashlyn cooed as she picked up her still crying son and held him close against her chest and kissed his soft head. “I’m sorry I woke you up buddy” she kissed him again. “Yes I am. I’ll be smarter next time, I promise.”

“Congrats on the win yesterday ladies” Deb smiled at the two athletes. “How’s your ankle Whitney?”

“Sore now, but I’ll ice it and put it up for a little bit this afternoon and that’ll help a lot” the defender replied as they all looked at her right ankle. She had been the victim of a late tackle towards the end of the game and had a tough time walking it off. “I’m glad we don’t have another game until Saturday this week. I might have had trouble playing if we had a Wednesday night match.”

“Here” Ali said as she got up and moved towards the recliner, “sit down and put your foot up.” She patted the recliner and smiled at Whitney. “I’ll get you some ice.” She walked back through the room on her way to the kitchen. “Have you guys eaten? Do you want some lunch?”

“Mike, why don’t you take her suitcase upstairs for her?” Deb suggested as Ashlyn and Whitney exchanged a confused look.

“Guys, I’m ok. I promise” the defender chuckled as she sat in the recliner. “I’m still good to take care of the dogs while you’re gone. Don’t worry.”

“Oooooh, that’s totally what’s going on” Ashlyn agreed with a grin as she sat on the couch making silly faces at her son. “You should have milked that longer Whit” she teased. “You’re too easy.”

Ali came back with a bag of ice wrapped inside a clean dish towel and waited while Whitney took her sneaker and sock off before gently placing it over the big, swollen bruise.

“So does that mean you’re not interested in Gram’s mac and cheese?” the brunette quirked an eyebrow at her wife.

Whitney laughed and patted Fred and Persey who had come to try, unsuccessfully, to get into the chair with her.

“Hey now, don’t be joking about Gram’s mac and cheese” the keeper said seriously, but with a twinkle in her eye.

“I would never” Ali said just as seriously but couldn’t quite keep the smile out of the corners of her mouth. “It’s warming in the oven. Whit do you want some too?”

They all sat around, laughing and talking about Ali’s birthday party the day before while the two blondes ate their late lunch. Ali got one last feeding in before they left and looked, for the twentieth time that day, at the bottles in the fridge, ready to go for Drew until they returned home the next evening. Deb and Mike were going to take care of Drew and Whitney was going to take care of the dogs. Although Ali and Ashlyn were pretty sure Mike and Whitney would end up switching jobs soon after they left the house. And Ali had a hard time leaving the baby, again. Deb repeated what she and Sydney had done three weeks earlier and pretended he needed a change and took him upstairs to try and make it easier for the brunette to get out the door.

“I wish I could tell you it gets easier” the keeper said quietly as they drove away from the house, regrettably already an expert at leaving her newborn son. She held her wife’s hand over the console of the Subaru coupe as Ali sniffled. “But it really doesn’t.”

An hour and a half later they pulled into the small cottage they had rented for the night in
Ogunquit, Maine. The seaside inn had a main house with several rooms in it, sort of like a bed and breakfast. But there were also six small cottages spread out along the beach, close enough so you could hear the ocean but far enough away so they didn’t get demolished in one of the Nor’easters that pummeled the coast several times each winter. They weren’t fancy. They were clean and cozy, comprised of one big room where there were tall windows facing the water, a separate bedroom with a full bathroom and a small kitchen on the beachside or back of the structure. There were no frills – no tv, no soaking tub, no double shower or swanky kitchen appliances. Two window air conditioners were all that kept the heat and humidity out of the cottage. One was in the bedroom and one was in one of the side windows of the big room. There was a big couch with a crisp white slipcover and a coffee table in front of it, that faced the windows looking over the ocean. There was a small table and two wooden chairs back by the kitchen and a couple of other comfy chairs over near the couch. The focal point of the cottage was clear. You were there to enjoy the ocean and the beach.

Ashlyn parked the car and turned off the engine, looking at her beautiful wife, asleep in the passenger seat next to her. She smiled and rubbed her thumb across the back of Ali’s hand, fingers still entwined even after her hour-long nap. The keeper admired the pretty bracelet on her wrist. It was a charm bracelet, silver with three charms and several beautiful tiny emeralds dotting the chain that made up the bracelet. One of the silver charms was a mermaid, another was a baby rattle, and the third was a heart. Ashlyn had given it to her wife after the baby was born in an attempt to thank her for giving them the greatest gift in the world. Emerald was the birth stone for May and Ashlyn always associated mermaids with Ali. The brunette could add more charms to it as she saw fit. It was a lovely and thoughtful gift and she had been moved to tears by it when Ashlyn had given it to her before she flew to ESPN the first time in June.

“Sweetheart, we’re here” she lifted Ali’s hand, leaned over and kissed it. She left her lips against the soft skin for a few seconds and smiled again when her wife stirred. “Honey, wake up now so we can check in and get to dinner on time.”

Ashlyn separated their fingers and rested her hand on Ali’s shoulder, shaking it gently. The brunette took a deep breath and exhaled for a long minute, never opening her eyes. Finally, after another kiss to her knuckles and one more little shake of her shoulder she opened her eyes and blinked a few times. She stretched and turned her head towards the driver’s seat, smiling softly when she saw her keeper’s face.

“Hi” she said quietly.

“Hi beautiful.”

“I fell asleep.” Ali’s voice was adorable as she tried to wake herself up.

“You did” Ashlyn grinned and her dimple appeared. “Did you have a good nap?”

The brunette grinned back and giggled at her wife’s words, knowing the double meaning of the question.

“I did” she nodded and yawned as she straightened up in her seat. “I had a good nap.”

They made it on time for their 6pm dinner reservation at a nice seafood restaurant right on the ocean, but in the center of town. They talked about Ashlyn’s trip to Chicago and Ali’s birthday party at Ken’s house. And, of course, they talked about Drew and all of the cute things he had done since Ashlyn had left Friday afternoon. They were relaxed and happy and enjoying one another’s company. Ali even had a glass of wine with her birthday dinner and could not believe how incredible it tasted. She knew that she could have a glass of wine every night if she wanted to, but
she had fought off the urge thus far. She just couldn’t have more than one and she should wait a little bit before nursing or pumping to make sure the alcohol had been absorbed into her system first. When they returned to the cottage they decided to walk down to the ocean before going inside. It was a warm and muggy night but there was the hint of a breeze coming in over the sea. Ali was comfortable in her simple but pretty, yellow sleeveless sundress and sandals as they walked arm-in-arm through the sand towards the water. Ashlyn wore madras print shorts and a pink short sleeved, collared shirt open over a tight white tank top. She knew her wife loved her in pink and she had worn the shirt just for her. She stepped out of her sperry’s and added Ali’s sandals to them as they waded into the waves up to their calves.

Both women knew what was next on the agenda for the evening, even though they hadn’t talked about it. It wasn’t stressing either of them out but they were both anxious about having sex again. Mostly the good anxious, the looking forward to it kind of anxious. They stood there and looked out over the dark waves, trying to see the horizon. It was a bit overcast so the moon was barely visible and offered very little light to help them see. They stood and breathed in the briny sea air for a long time.

“How are you doing? Are you having a good birthday my love?” Ashlyn smiled at her wife and leaned over to kiss her cheek.

“I can’t believe I’m 35 years old” the brunette sighed and chuckled. “But other than that, yes, I’m having a wonderful birthday” she moved in front of her keeper, wrapped her arms around her neck and brought their lips together in a slow, deep kiss.

On the scale of their kisses over the years, this was one of the very best ones ever. It was slow and pure and filled with love and tenderness, with just a hint of desire running underneath it all. Ashlyn couldn’t tell if the warm breeze was making her skin tingle or if it was the kiss itself that did the trick, but she felt amazing. Ali felt incredible in her arms as they shared that kiss with the sea swirling around their shins.

“I love you so much Ali” the keeper said sincerely after they broke for air. “I can’t believe how my love for you keeps growing stronger” she started to get choked up. “I’ve never loved you more than I do right now baby, but I know I’ll love you even more tomorrow.”

“Ashlyn, you say the sweetest things to me. Thank you” the brunette replied as she cupped her keeper’s face with both hands. “I love you too. So very much.”

They kissed for a while longer, enjoying the feel of soft lips and warm skin and loving tongues. Just before it started to get too passionate they grabbed their shoes and walked back up to their cottage. There was a gorgeous bouquet of flowers in a vase on the coffee table when they returned to the cottage.

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On the scale of their kisses over the years, this was one of the very best ones ever. It was slow and pure and filled with love and tenderness, with just a hint of desire running underneath it all. Ashlyn couldn’t tell if the warm breeze was making her skin tingle or if it was the kiss itself that did the trick, but she felt amazing. Ali felt incredible in her arms as they shared that kiss with the sea swirling around their shins.

“I love you so much Ali” the keeper said sincerely after they broke for air. “I can’t believe how my love for you keeps growing stronger” she started to get choked up. “I’ve never loved you more than I do right now baby, but I know I’ll love you even more tomorrow.”

“Ashlyn, you say the sweetest things to me. Thank you” the brunette replied as she cupped her keeper’s face with both hands. “I love you too. So very much.”

They kissed for a while longer, enjoying the feel of soft lips and warm skin and loving tongues. Just before it started to get too passionate they grabbed their shoes and walked back up to their cottage. There was a gorgeous bouquet of flowers in a vase on the coffee table when they returned to the cottage.

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“I can’t remember what orange roses mean babe, I’m sorry” she leaned back against the back of the couch and reached up for her wife’s hands.

“That’s ok, it’s not a quiz” the blonde chuckled and then leaned down to kiss the top of Ali’s head, holding her hands and resting them on her shoulders.

“But I love when you give me flowers and tell me what they mean” she tilted her head all the way back and puckered her lips for a kiss. After she received one she smiled and squeezed her wife’s hands. “I know red is love, like deep strong love. And yellow is friendship. And pink is sweeter, less intense or powerful than red...”

“Look who’s been paying attention?” Ashlyn teased and kissed her cheek this time, letting her lips linger near the brunette’s ear for a few seconds. She kissed her jawline, right at the base of her ear and then sucked her earlobe into her mouth for a few more seconds. “Orange is like a fiery blaze” she explained, breathing into Ali’s ear. “They signify passion, energy and intense desire.”

“Mmmmm” Ali hummed and closed her eyes as she enjoyed her keeper’s lips and hot breath in her ear. “I would have remembered that.” She turned her head and met Ashlyn’s lips with her own, smirking into the kiss. “This must be the first time you’ve given me orange roses.”

“It is” the blonde agreed with a smile as she stood back up. “I’ve been saving them for something special.”

Ali thought about all of the big moments in their lives together so far and was surprised that none of them had been special enough for the orange roses. Anniversaries and birthdays aside, there was also their wedding and their honeymoon. What made this birthday getaway so different? The brunette turned sideways to look at the tall blonde standing behind her. God she loved that woman so much that it made her heart flutter right there on the spot.

“What’s so special about this birthday?” she asked, innocently looking up at her wife and frowning a little bit as she tried to think what the answer could be. “Is it because I’m 35 and that’s, like, officially half-way to 40 or something like that...like, are we marking the age as significant?”

Ashlyn laughed out loud and immediately felt bad because the brunette’s face fell and then flashed momentarily with anger. Or was it hurt? She knew Ali was having a hard time with turning 35. The pregnancy and postpartum hormones made so many of their interactions riskier than they normally would have been.

“No, baby” the keeper began and walked around to sit next to Ali on the couch, facing her and holding her hands between them. “You know I don’t believe in age. It’s just a dumb date on a calendar” she reminded her wife with a warm smile and a gentle peck on her still frowning lips. “I don’t care if you’re 35 or 55 today, I’d still be giving you these orange roses.”

Ali’s whole body relaxed when she heard those words and saw how honest and sincere the keeper was being as she said them. She believed that Ashlyn would still want her and desire her passionately when she was 55, because she knew she would feel the same for her in twenty years too.

“But then why this birthday?” the brunette tilted her head and watched her wife’s beautiful face smiling back at her.

“Your birthday was a very good excuse for them, but it’s not really about your birthday.” She saw Ali’s brow furrow in confusion and quickly kept going, sensing her frustration. “I’ve been saving them for a time when, someday, maybe, you might be doubting how much I want you or...how
beautiful your body is or something like that. I’ve almost given them to you a dozen times before now, because I always feel passionately about you” she smiled shyly and then looked down at Ali’s hands in hers in her lap. “But I’m so glad I waited. Because I know you don’t love everything about your body right now honey” she met her wife’s cinnamon eyes, “and that’s totally ok and I get it – well, as much as someone who’s never given birth before can get it. But I want to make sure you understand that your body is gorgeous and I love you and it and even the parts of it that you don’t love right now. And...that’s not a pink rose kind of love I’m talking about” she paused and studied Ali’s beautiful face for a minute. “This is all orange rose passion going on over here, and it’s all for you.”

Her voice lowered as she spoke the last couple of sentences and she leaned in and gave Ali a soft kiss, using every bit of will power to keep from jumping right into a passionate one right there on the couch.

“There’s a pink rose kiss for you my love” she breathed out, an inch away from the brunette’s face. “The orange rose kisses will be later, whenever you’re ready.”

Ali felt her body melt and explode simultaneously in response to the words and the kiss and the proximity of those lips she loved so much. She closed her eyes and kissed Ashlyn hard, pushing her against the arm of the couch and leaning heavily into her chest. She was shocked and disappointed to feel Ashlyn’s hands pushing back against her as they broke the kiss to breathe a few minutes later.

“What’s wrong?” her voice wavered as she searched her keeper’s face for some explanation.

“Nothing’s wrong” Ashlyn choked out, having a hard time controlling her orange rose level of desire. “It’s just...we should wait a little bit longer.” She pulled Ali into a hug as they both caught their breath. “I want to give you your present” she kissed her lips softly as they pulled apart. “And you need to pump...”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right” Ali cut her off and looked away, embarrassed for some reason that her breastfeeding duties had interrupted their sexy foreplay.

“Hey” Ashlyn pulled her face back in and held it with her hand until the brunette lifted her apologetic eyes. “Don’t do that. God, you’re so worried about being perfect all the time that you don’t even see how perfect you already are.” She shook her head slowly and smiled at her wife. “I’m being selfish really” she continued, “if you pump now then we won’t have to stop in a little bit when we’re...busier.”

They looked into each other’s eyes for a minute and Ali’s worry about ruining the moment fell away as she saw all the love and devotion and desire staring back at her. Leave it to her keeper to plan the perfect evening, right down to the timing of the walk on the beach and the flowers, all so it would be time for Ali to pump before they moved to the bedroom and took things to the next level. The conversations and arguments they had had while Ali was pregnant about mixing ‘baby’ and ‘sex’ flashed through the brunette’s mind as she gazed at the love of her life. Of course Ashlyn would try to make it so she wouldn’t have to stop having sex to go pump. She knew Ali was trying to stick to a schedule so she could keep breastfeeding for a full year. Of course Ashlyn would be this thoughtful and considerate and perfect.

“You...” Ali started and stopped. All of the loving, romantic, heartfelt words she had said to her wife over the past few years seemed so trite and meaningless compared to what she felt right at that moment. “I...I don’t know what to say to tell you how much I love you anymore Ash” she blinked away a couple of tears. “You always find a way to amaze me with how much you care for me and there just aren’t words to tell you how much I love you.”
I love you too sweetheart” she replied and pulled her into another hug. “I love you too.”

They spent the next thirty minutes at the small table near the kitchen so Ali could plug the electric pump in and try to convince her breasts that her sweet baby was ready to nurse. They talked about Drew and looked at pictures of him on their phones as they sat next to each other.

“Can I give you your present now or do you want to wait until you’re finished?”

“Ummm, it depends what it is I guess” Ali tried to answer the question. “You decide.”

Ashlyn walked into the bedroom where their bags were and came back with a beautifully wrapped gift box. She took her seat again and placed the gift in Ali’s lap as she kissed her cheek.

“Happy birthday honey. My favorite day of the year” the keeper beamed at her wife.

The brunette unwrapped the gift box, about one foot square and two inches deep, and lifted out a beautiful photo album. It was dark leather with a single letter ‘A’ engraved, or branded, onto the cover. She lifted it out of the box with wide eyes and ran her hand across the mildly textured cover. The ‘A’ was situated so that the binding of the album was at the top and you opened it and turned the pages from the bottom up. Ali lifted the cover up to reveal a three-ring binder style system at the top so you could add or remove pages if you wanted to.

“It’s a sketch album” Ashlyn explained, helpfully.

The first page was a parchment style piece of paper, covered in the keeper’s surprisingly girly script.

‘For Ali – the fifth time celebrating the best day of the year (although you were sneaky on the first one so I had to celebrate late) is the best one yet. A day that is all about you where I can spoil you and baby you as much as I want because it’s your birthday. That’s my idea of heaven right there. I love you so much! Love always, Ashlyn’

“It’s beautiful” Ali said softly as she turned the page, eyes glued to the charcoal sketch she had just uncovered.

The album was designed to display and protect sketches with each page consisting of a sleeve with a plastic cover and a section of thick parchment paper you could write on underneath each one. There were twelve sketches in it so far, with just as many pages remaining, still to be filled. Ashlyn had sketched her wife dozens of times while she was pregnant. Sometimes Ali knew about it and participated, posing for her. Sometimes Ali knew about it and tolerated it as she studied or worked or read. Sometimes Ali was asleep or just unaware of the blonde sketching away from the other side of the bed or the room. The first sketch was labelled ‘One Month’ and every page after it was labelled similarly throughout Ali’s pregnancy, all the way through ‘Nine Months’. The brunette was tastefully naked in every sketch, which was definitely not how she had been when many of the sketches were done. Not all of them anyway.

“Hey” she blushed and looked at her adoring wife. “I wasn’t naked in all of these.” Her voice wasn’t accusatory. She was just trying to understand how the sketches had come to be. Truthfully, she had been so busy and distracted in the early months of her pregnancy that Ashlyn probably could have convinced her that she was just not remembering it accurately. “How...”

“I’m lucky enough to get to see you without your clothes on a lot” Ashlyn grinned. “I’m the luckiest person in the world. I just removed your clothes in the sketches.”

The sketches were beautiful. Most of them were of Ali stretched out in bed, or leaning up against
the headboard, in profile. One was of her drying off after a bath and another was of her in the shower. And one was of her sleeping on the couch in her office in the late afternoon sunlight. Half of them were just black charcoal but the other half had been brought to life with subtle additions and accents by colored pencils. As the months went on the changes to the brunette’s body became more obvious, primarily in her breasts and baby bump. But there were slight changes to her face and arms as her body carried all the extra weight in the later months. The last three sketches were Ali’s favorites. They were all of her with her baby boy laying across her stomach or on her breast or chest and were labelled ‘Newborn’, ‘June’, and ‘July’. The June sketch was a close up of baby Drew nursing and captured all the little wrinkles of his neck as well as his tiny little hand on Ali’s breast.

The brunette sighed and oohed and aaahed as she turned page after page. She was more self-conscious about the earlier pictures of just her, but her nose-crinkling smile graced her face as soon as Drew appeared.

“I did those for me, at first anyway, so I could remember how beautiful you were while you were pregnant. You never really liked me taking pictures. But when I was thinking about what I wanted to give you for your birthday I realized that this was it.” Ashlyn paused, trying to find some words to help her explain her gift better. “If I could give you anything in the world it would be the ability to see yourself the way I see you. I know that sounds kind of corny, but I really mean it. And this sketch album is the closest I can come to doing that for you. I’m going to keep adding to it and then, who knows, maybe I’ll start another one for you…”

“These are beautiful honey” Ali said emotionally, words finally able to leave her lips again. “Really Ash, you’re so talented...I don’t even know what to say. Thank you.”

“I want you to look at those Ali. I mean it. You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen and I want you to see that too.”

“I’ll try, I promise.” Ali leaned over and kissed Ashlyn’s lips, humming into them and then kissing them again. “I don’t know what I’m going to tell my mom when she asks me what you got me for my birthday” she chuckled as she pulled back and started disconnecting the breast pump.

“As far as I’m concerned, this would go on our coffee table so everybody could see how gorgeous you are...”

Ali laughed her short, loud, shout of a laugh and then realized she might have hurt her keeper’s feelings.

“Oh come on” she gave Ashlyn a questioning look. “You don’t really expect me to have a book with naked pictures of myself on our coffee table?” She quirked her eyebrow at her wife. “Have we met?”

“No, I get it” the blonde replied shyly. “I just meant in my perfect world there would be naked pictures of you everywhere...” she giggled and kissed Ali’s cheek.

“I know” Ali giggled with her. “I feel the same about you.” She labelled and put her breastmilk in the refrigerator while Ashlyn washed the breast shields and valves in the sink so they would be ready for the next time they were needed, in about five hours. The brunette wrapped her arms around her wife from behind and squeezed. “I just can’t get over how sweet you are to me Ashlyn. It takes my breath away every time you do something like that for me” she nodded at the thoughtful, lovely gift on the table. “Thank you so much sweetheart.”

“Will you dance with me?” the keeper asked as she dried her hands and turned around to face her
smiling wife.

“Yes” Ali answered with a sweet kiss.

Ashlyn played the current version of the romantic dinner playlist they had used during their first official date, the one they had danced to in the kitchen of the big old house. They moved together slowly as the music played and let the romantic music help bring them back to where they had been an hour earlier. They kissed and gradually let their hands start exploring as their tongues joined in and deepened the kisses. After four or five songs they were making out and panting for breath as their hands found breasts and hips and tattoos. It was urgent and patient at the same time. They both knew where they were headed but were enjoying the journey to get there. Ashlyn had promised herself that, no matter what Ali said or did to distract her, she was going to worship the brunette’s body that night. Every last inch of her was going to be kissed and caressed and loved, no matter how long it took.

And that’s exactly what she did. They spent hours that night loving each other and giving each other orgasms. Ali balked at first at her keeper’s approach. She was eager to prove to Ashlyn how ready she was to have sex and how ardently she wanted to have sex with her. But she followed Ashlyn’s lead. The brunette woke up in the middle of the night, after two orgasms each and about three hours of sleep, and went to the small table again to pump. When she was finished, she made her way back to the bedroom and woke her wife up with soft kisses down her body. She let her tongue re-trace every one of her tattoos while her hands ventured to other soft flesh, stroking and caressing Ashlyn’s warm skin. There was nothing tentative about any of their lovemaking that night. Ali knew her body wasn’t going to let her down or cause her pain, and she was completely open and honest with her wife about everything. Ashlyn was careful not to thrust too hard or be too rough. As confident and turned on as the brunette was, she was still only two months removed from giving birth. They talked about her sensitive, swollen breasts and agreed that Ali would handle them herself. The keeper was more than willing to help if her wife told her what she wanted and how much she wanted. They also agreed, to Ali’s initial embarrassment but then ultimate relief, that the brunette would wear her supportive nursing bra to keep the discomfort down while they had sex.

They spent the next day in bed or on the couch so they could look out at the ocean as they lay in each other’s arms. They had to check out at 4pm and they made the most of it. Ashlyn brought them back breakfast while Ali pumped again and they fed each other in bed. The brunette gave her keeper a massage and made a mental note to not let so much time go between massages again. It had taken the image of the new intern rubbing her wife’s lower back two weeks earlier to spur Ali on. She realized as they drove home from the stadium that evening after the soccer camp that she couldn’t even remember the last time she had given Ashlyn a massage. But that afternoon in the beach cottage she remembered how much she loved to give her keeper those massages. And it was more than just the physical contact. She felt like she was helping Ashlyn get her body ready for the pitch and it made her feel helpful and useful in a really tangible way. And after her massage, the blonde gave her wife her own massage that, for the first time in almost a year, wasn’t focused on her pregnancy. In fact, it was downright dirty and Ali loved every titillating minute of it as it led to another orgasm for each of them.

As they showered, separately so they wouldn’t miss their check out time, and got packed up for the drive back to the big old house, they both felt like they had added oil to their engine to keep it running smoothly. They had given it a little tune-up there in the beach cottage just to make sure everything was still in working order and ready to get back on the road again after Drew’s birth. Ashlyn felt the trust and love from her wife and Ali felt like her body was her own again. It had been a short trip away for the couple, but a very emotional and productive one that neither of them would forget any time soon.
Meg’s visit started the following weekend, with a quiet four days at home in between for Ashlyn. The Breakers played Washington Saturday to kick off their busy August schedule and then they had a week off for a FIFA break. Ali dropped Mike off in Stoneham so he could get a ride into the stadium with Sydney, Dom and Cash while she and her mom continued to the airport with Drew. The brunette’s heart swelled when Meg ran towards her, face lit up in a huge grin.

“Aliiiiiii!” she yelled as she wrapped her arms around the brunette’s legs in a tight hug.

“Hi Meg” Ali bent over and hugged her back, kissing her head.

“Hi Meg” Ali bent over and hugged her back, kissing her head. “I’m so glad you’re here. How was your flight?”

Hannah caught up a few minutes later and they made their way down to baggage claim and then out to the truck where Deb and Drew were waiting. Meg had asked about the baby as soon as she told Ali about how bumpy the airplane trip had been. The brunette told the seven-year old that Drew and her mom were waiting in the truck for them. Meg sat in the backseat on a booster seat with Deb and Drew in his carseat. Hannah rode shotgun as they headed for the stadium and the Breakers 4pm game. Meg asked a million questions about the baby during the forty-minute drive.

“Meggie honey, calm down” Hannah urged softly. “You’re going to be with him all week. There’ll be lots of time for all your questions.”

“I’m glad you’re excited to meet him Meg” Ali replied, taking a quick glance in the rear-view mirror as she spoke. “We’ve been telling him all about you, and even though he can’t talk yet, I know he’s excited to meet you too.”

Hannah was staying one night and then flying to NYC on Sunday afternoon to meet Dev for their vacation on the French Riviera. The plan for Saturday was for seven year old Meg to meet the baby and get used to the new norm at the house and re-establish her connection with Ali and Ashlyn. She was going to be one of the player escorts on the field that day and she would be accompanying Ashlyn to her soccer camp the next day as an official camper. Ali’s group met up with Sydney’s group at the stadium and, even though the gates hadn’t officially opened yet, they went up to the Knight-Harris suite after Ali checked them in as family and showed her ID. Hannah and Mike and Meg were all dazzled by the gorgeous new stadium and the fancy suite.

“Ash wanted us to bring her down to the locker room so she could say hi” Ali reminded Hannah. “Are you ready?”

Halfway down to the locker room Drew started to get a little fussy and by the time they got to Ashlyn and the rest of the team he was crying.

“What’s wrong with him” Meg asked, scrunching up her face.

“Oh, he’s hungry” Ali explained with a smile. “I’ll feed him now that we’re here” she knocked on the locker room door. “He’s loud isn’t he?”

Meg nodded and giggled with the brunette as Ashlyn opened the locker room door.

“Megatron!!” she yelled and bent down to scoop up the little girl and spin her around in her arms.

“Ashyun!!” she replied and buried her face in the keeper’s neck with an ear to ear grin.
Even though she was perfectly capable of saying her name correctly, Meg still called her Ashyun. Nobody knew if it was out of habit or a conscious choice on Meg’s part. Ashlyn didn’t want to ask because she didn’t want to make her self-conscious about it. The keeper loved the way Meg said her name, with a ‘y’ instead of the ‘l’ that had been too hard to pronounce when she was younger.

Ashlyn, still holding Meg in her arms, greeted her wife with a kiss and a concerned look.

“I just need to feed him” Ali replied.

The blonde gave Hannah a hug hello and then escorted them into the locker room where they were greeted with nineteen warm and loud hellos from her teammates. Whitney came over first and gave Meg a big hug when she leaned towards her, causing Ashlyn to pout for a minute.

“So what’s the story with ‘Megatron’?” Hannah asked her ex as they stood there for a minute, watching Meg laugh and giggle her way through the team from Whitney’s arms.

“She picked it” Ashlyn answered with a grin. “I voted for ‘Magnificent’ but gave her final say since it is her nickname and all.”

Hannah gave her a quizzical look.

“After that goal she made at her soccer game. She showed me the video about a hundred times so we decided she needed a nickname for when she’s a beast on the field.”

“Ahh” Hannah nodded. “Got it. Yeah, she’s pretty good. Who knew?” she chuckled.

Thirty minutes later, after she had said hi to everybody and met the new teammates, Meg looked around the locker room and saw that a lot of the players were huddled around Ali and the baby in the corner. Whitney and Ashlyn and Tasha Dowie and Angela Salem and Rose Lavelle were all goofing around with her but Meg wanted to know what was so interesting about Ali and the baby. She left the five players and walked towards the larger group of about ten women, which included her own mother. Ashlyn and Whitney watched her squeeze between players’ legs to get closer and glanced nervously at each other.

“Oh, who wants to burp him?” Ali asked as she wiped Drew’s mouth and folded her top down over her exposed nipple in one smooth move.

Kristie Mewis reached out for the burp cloth, threw it over her shoulder and then wiggled both of her hands at Ali.

“Back off ladies, he’s mine” the midfielder warned with a smile. She squealed with excitement when the brunette handed Drew over to her. “Hi handsome boy. It’s Auntie Kristie, remember me?”

“What were you doing?” Meg’s little voice came from a few feet away, surprising Ali who was re-attaching her nursing bra flap as she watched Kristie burp her baby boy.

“Oh, hi sweetheart, I didn’t see you there” Ali smiled at the little girl. “I was feeding the baby. Remember how he was crying?”

“Ah-huh” Meg nodded and came closer to the brunette.

“Well he was hungry and trying to tell me. That’s why he was crying.”

Meg was right next to Ali and she reached out and poked Ali’s breast where Drew had just been...
“I thought babies ate from bottles?” she asked, confused, while her mother chastised her from a few feet away.

“Meg. You can’t just go up and poke somebody like that. Especially not in one of their private areas. You know that” Hannah quietly scolded. “Apologize to Ali.”

The little girl turned red and looked like she was about to cry from embarrassment or anger at her mother. It was hard to tell which.

“There are lots of new things to see with the baby, huh Meg?” Ali asked softly, reaching her hand out to hold the little girl’s. “It’s ok if you have questions. I’ll tell you anything you want to know, ok?”

The little girl hesitated for a few seconds and then nodded her head and let Ali pull her in for a hug.

“Meg...” Hannah was still waiting for the apology.

“I’m sorry I touched your private area” she mumbled into Ali’s chest as they hugged.

“Thank you for apologizing” Ali replied with a squeeze as she winked at Hannah. “Sometimes babies eat from bottles and sometimes they eat right from their mommy’s breast. Drew does both. Do you think you might want to try and feed him a bottle later tonight when we get back to the house?”

“Can I?” she asked, eyes wide with wonder as she pulled back from the hug to look at the brunette.

“I don’t see why not” Ali smiled again. “Ashlyn can teach you how. She’s the best at feeding him a bottle.”

“Hey!” Whitney pretended to be offended as she and the keeper approached, having seen and heard the whole exchange.

“Well, that’s a good point. Whit’s pretty good too. We’ll have to wait and ask Drew who is better” Ali chuckled.

Meg made the rounds once more, wishing everybody a good game, and then they left the players to get ready for warm-ups which would be starting soon. Ashlyn kissed her son on the head and then her wife on the lips. They smiled at each other, still feeling the charge from their romantic night away five nights ago.

“I love you.”

“I love you too. Kick ass out there” Ali encouraged. She turned to the locker room and yelled “Go Breakers!”

They went back up to the suite and Hannah took Meg to the bathroom before she had to stand on the pitch in front of thousands of people.

“You should take her down” Hannah said to Ali. “I don’t need to be part of this story” she chuckled. “I don’t want some deranged fan of hers coming after me, in real life or online” she rolled her eyes, remembering the crap Ali had to put up with after that Instagram post with the puppies a couple of years earlier.
“Are you sure?” Ali asked, wanting to be very sure.

“Positive” she replied. “I’m going to enjoy the hell out of this nice suite.”

It was times like that when Ali really liked and admired Hannah. She didn’t know if Hannah was really being unselfish or if she really was afraid of Ashlyn’s online trolls. But she appreciated the gesture. The Hannah from four years ago would have killed to get down onto the pitch and stick her face in every camera she could find. This Hannah, the one with the millionaire fiancé and the gigantic rock on her finger, was different. She was more confident and mature. Ali had never been one to believe Hannah’s excuse for her horrible behavior, about being jealous of the brunette and threatened by her relationship with Ashlyn, but maybe there was something to it after all.

The game had been good. The Breakers won, Ashlyn got a clean sheet and Whitney scored a goal when she headed in a corner kick from Rose Lavelle in the second half. Meg had been adorable during the walk outs, dressed in her own ‘Harris’ keeper jersey. She held hands with Ashlyn and then stood in front of her during the introductions and the national anthem. The keeper kept her hands on the little girl’s shoulders through the entire thing, only moving one hand to cover her heart as she sang. Ali couldn’t tell whose face had the bigger smile, Meg’s or her wife’s, as she stood and watched from the sideline with the other parents waiting to take their escort back to their seats. For all the trouble it had caused them at times, she was very happy that Ashlyn had insisted on making her relationship with Meg a priority in their lives. She was a sweet kid and she and Ashlyn made each other very happy.

That night they got back to the big old house just before 8pm, which was Meg’s bedtime. She started to get upset but Ashlyn told her that if she wanted to help her feed Drew his bottle that she would have to be a big girl and that meant going to bed at bedtime, following the rules, and all of those unfun things. Meg quickly adjusted her attitude, which, in turn, allowed the keeper to extend her bedtime to 8:30pm so they could get the feeding in. Hannah nodded her head at the blonde as she figured out what she had just done. She continued to be impressed with Ashlyn’s parenting skills. They weren’t always orthodox but they almost always got results.

Ashlyn got comfortable on the twin bed in the nursery, propping herself up against the headboard with the big stuffed reading pillow, yellow with green trim to match the room, and leaning her elbow on the big stuffed arm of the reading pillow to help support Meg and Drew. Hannah helped Meg get into place in front of the keeper, with her back to Ashlyn’s front. Then the red-head placed baby Drew in her daughter’s arms and kept her hands underneath him just in case. Ashlyn protectively cradled both children and helped Meg hold the bottle for baby Drew so he could latch onto it and fill his little belly. Hannah sat in the glider and watched, snapping a couple of pictures of the very cute scene.

“Just relax sweetie” Ashlyn said quietly to her favorite little girl. “Don’t be nervous, you’re doing great. If he feels that you’re nervous he’ll think he has to be nervous too and he won’t eat very well. So just try and relax.”

It took a little longer than usual, but after 45 minutes they sat up so the keeper could burp her son.

“Ew, gross” Meg commented when they finally heard a loud burp come from his chest. It was closely followed by a different noise coming from his other end, along with a strong smell. “What stinks?” Meg asked, wrinkling up her nose in disgust.

Ashlyn laughed as quietly as she could, not wanting to get Meg riled up so close to her bedtime.

“That’s him” she explained. “He just pooped and now we have to change his diaper. And it’s ok if you don’t want to help with that. It’s a stinky job and I wouldn’t blame you one bit.”
“Why don’t we get your bath started while Ash takes care of that diaper change, then she can come in and finish up your bath” Hannah suggested.

Normally Meg would have fought her tooth and nail but that night she agreed without a fuss. Maybe it was the stinky diaper or the new normal at the house or maybe she was just tired enough where it didn’t bother her. Nobody knew, but she followed her mother into the hall bathroom and got ready for her bath. When Ashlyn finished bathing her and got the seven-year old into her pajamas and then into the double bed in the front bedroom, she sat next to her on the bed and got ready to read to her. The front bedroom was going to be Meg’s room for this visit and no-one was sure how the little girl was going to adjust to it. That night she would share the big double bed with her mother, but for the rest of the week it would be all hers. And the dogs of course, Meg always slept with the dogs when she stayed at the big old house.

“Can we read ‘The Little Prince’ again?” Meg asked hopefully as Persey and Fred curled up on the bed with them.

“That’s a great idea” the blonde replied with a warm smile when she saw that the little girl had already found and brought the book from the nursery into the front bedroom. “How about this though,” she countered. “How about you read it to me and I’ll help you with some of the bigger words if you need it. Sound good?”

Ali came upstairs just as they were starting and bit her lip to keep from crying as she took in the sight and sound of sweet little Meg reading her favorite book to her wife.

“Can I come in?”

They both looked up and smiled at the brunette as Meg patted the bed on her other side so Ali would know where to sit. She read to the two women for twenty minutes more until she got too sleepy to continue. They bookmarked the page and tucked Meg in for the night.

“Good night Meg, sleep well” Ali kissed her forehead.

“I love you Meggie” Ashlyn added with her own kiss. “See you in the morning.”

At 3:45am there was a knock on the hallway door of the master bedroom and Ali sat up with a start. She threw the covers off and moved quickly to the door, opening it wide, ready to deal with whatever the baby needed. Instead of her mother, who she expected, she found Hannah looking nervous and upset.

“What’s the matter?” she asked quickly. “Is Meg ok?”

“I don’t know” Hannah replied, wringing her hands. “She’s gone.”

“What do you mean she’s gone?” Ali’s voice was low and quiet but anxious as her brain tried to process the new information.

“I woke up and she wasn’t in bed. I’ve looked everywhere. Is she in there with you guys?” Hannah spoke fast with a rising panic pushing all of her words together.

“No” Ali shook her head and walked back into the bedroom to doublecheck with Hannah following her. “Ash” she jostled her wife’s leg as she walked past the foot of the bed to check the master bathroom, “wake up.”

Ashlyn sat bolt upright in bed and rubbed her face with both hands.
“What’s going on? Is the baby ok?”

The three women spread out to check all the rooms again. Ashlyn ran down the backstairs to check the first floor and noted that the dogs were nowhere to be found either. Hannah ran up to the third floor to check the two rooms and the attic storage area again. Ali quietly opened the guest room door where Deb and Mike were fast asleep and checked the hall bathroom. No Meg. She silently entered Whitney’s room and then went into her bathroom. Still no Meg. Rather than risk waking the defender with another pass through her bedroom, the brunette went into the nursery from the bathroom and checked on Drew while she was in there. From the bathroom door she walked to the left rear corner of the room to get to the crib and found her son asleep. As she turned to leave she looked at the rest of the room and gasped when she saw little Meg, sleeping soundly in her old bed on the other side of the room. Persey and Fred were curled up with her and the brindle dog lifted her head and wagged her tail.

“Good girl Persey. It’s ok. Good girl” Ali soothed the dog with a quick head rub so she didn’t wake up either sleeping child.

She went back to the crib and picked up Drew, careful not to disturb his slumber, and went back into the hall. She put the baby in the bassinette by her side of the bed and then ran down the back stairs to let Ashlyn and Hannah know Meg was just fine.

“What do you mean she was in the nursery?” Hannah’s eyes were wild with panic. She and Ashlyn had expanded the search to the basement and the backyard, both getting increasingly upset with every passing minute. “I...I...”

“It’s ok Han” Ashlyn hugged the distraught mother and rubbed her back. “She’s ok. It doesn’t matter. She’s alright.”

“But that’s the first place I checked” her voice was raw with fear, frustration and now, embarrassment. “She wasn’t there.”

The three women were standing in the mudroom in their pajamas, hearts still pounding from the scare. The keeper looked over Hannah’s shoulder, still hugging her, and blinked a silent ‘thank you’ at her wife. Ali gave her a small smile and nodded as she reached out and patted Hannah’s back reassuringly. The gesture surprised the brunette. She didn’t hate Hannah any more, she would never truly trust her, but she didn’t hate her. And she sure as hell never would have thought she would be able to try and comfort the same woman who had caused her wife so much pain and grief when they were dating. What a difference four years made.

“Come on, let’s sit down for a few minutes” she urged as she walked into the kitchen. “Do you want tea? Or steamed milk? Or something stronger?”

Ashlyn led Hannah to the nook, her arm still around her shoulder as she squeezed her. It was dark outside and there was only the kitchen light dimly illuminating the big first floor family room.

“I’ll take a whiskey” the blonde answered quietly.

“Me too, please” Hannah squeaked out as she fought the tears that were starting to fall.

Ali carried over a bottle of whiskey and three short glasses, set them on the nook table and sat in one of the chairs across from Ashlyn and Hannah. She poured two fingers of the amber liquor into each glass and passed them across the table. Hannah sniffled and her hand shook as she put it around the glass, her eyes and head still down. The brunette got up one more time and grabbed the box of tissues from the sofa table behind the nearby family room couch and brought them back to
the nook.

“Here” she slid them towards the red head.

“Thanks” Hannah said as she took one and blew her nose. “I’m so sorry you guys…”

“Don’t even start” Ashlyn interrupted, lifting her own glass to her lips and taking a sip. “We knew this might be a problem. I’m just glad she’s ok.” She took another sip. “I don’t think I’ve ever been so scared in my whole life” she exhaled as she leaned back against the banquette and took her arm off of Hannah’s shoulders.

“I don’t understand how she got there though” Hannah still couldn’t move past it. She took a sip of whiskey, winced a little, and looked up at Ali. “I swear she wasn’t there.”

“I don’t get it either” the brunette leaned forward and rested her elbows on the table, holding her glass between both hands. “She was sound asleep with both dogs.”

“What’s going on?” Whitney’s tense voice surprised them from the dark dining room as she moved towards them.

“Fuck!” Ashlyn yelled and almost spilled her drink as she jumped.

Ali and Hannah chuckled, nervous laughter at first but then it changed to relieved laughter after a few seconds. The brunette turned around to see Whitney crossing the family room and looking very concerned.

“Is everything ok?” she asked again, getting annoyed that nobody was answering her. “I woke up and all the doors were open and nobody was in their beds.”

“Yeah, everything’s ok now, except you gave me a fucking heart attack” the keeper answered sharply, still reeling from both scares.

Whitney sat in the chair at the end of the nook, between Ali and Ashlyn, and looked sternly from face to face.

“I woke up and Meg wasn’t in bed” Hannah explained as she got her laughter under control. “And I couldn’t find her anywhere and I panicked.”

“She went and got in her old bed in the nursery, with the dogs, no less” Ali added with her last couple of giggles. “But she wasn’t there when Hannah looked for her. Figure that one out Inspector Poirot.”

Whitney Engen had helped them unravel so many puzzles over the years they had lived together that Ashlyn and Ali started calling her different detective names. Sometimes she was Miss Marple, or Jessica Fletcher, or Inspector Clouseau or Sherlock Holmes...

“She left the bed you were sharing” the defender looked at Hannah, brows furrowed, as she reached for Ashlyn’s glass of whiskey and finished it in one gulp.

“Hey” the keeper protested the theft of her liquor drink. When her best friend gave her a withering look in return she got up to get another glass, grumbling all the while.

“And then when you looked for her in the nursery she wasn’t there?” Whitney continued despite Ashlyn’s complaints.
“Mmm-hmm” Hannah nodded as she took another sip and visibly started to relax. Her hands had stopped shaking and she leaned back against the banquette seat.

“With the dogs” Ali added again. “They don’t really do stealth either so I can’t figure it out.”

“Well neither does Meg” Hannah chuckled. “Unless Dev and I are trying to have sex, then she’s a goddamned ninja” she laughed along with Ali and Whitney.

“What on earth are you crazy girls doing up at this hour?!” Deb hissed as she walked over to the nook from the back stairs. “And why are Meg and the dogs in the nursery?”

She stood there in her nightgown, next to Whitney, with her hands on her hips and looked at her daughter first. Ali swallowed and fought the strong memories from her childhood that swam all around her. The younger women all looked at each other like they were 14 and had been caught redhanded with illicit alcohol. Ali started to giggle and they all lost it.

Ashlyn handed Deb a glass and motioned to the seat she had just vacated. “Join us for a drink?” she asked as she sat in the chair next to her wife. She poured some more whiskey into Whitney’s glass and her own and then Deb’s after she stopped protesting. “Come on, it’ll be our little secret” she winked at her mother-in-law and then kissed Ali’s cheek after she finished pouring.

They quickly filled Deb in on the disappearance and search and ensuing mystery.

“Oh geez” Whitney chuckled and looked apologetically at Hannah. “I forgot all about this, but I’ll bet Meg didn’t.”

“What?” they all asked at the same time, causing another fit of giggles.

“Last year we were goofing around and we made the bathroom and my room the ‘secret passage’ into her room. It was her last day and it was raining so we started playing hide and seek...”

“Oh yeah, I remember that” Ashlyn smiled at the memory. “That was actually pretty fun.”

“It was” the defender agreed. “We watched ‘Brave’ again and you know how the three little brothers always popped up through secret passages and things like that?”

“Yeah, like when they’re trying to get the key to get Merida out of her room” Ali agreed.

Hannah and Deb both gave Ashlyn surprised looks when they heard her wife’s reply.

“What can I say?” the keeper bragged. “She can talk for an hour about hidden symbolism and subversive meaning in twelve different Hitchcock films and then tell you all about her favorite Disney movie too. She’s a real renaissance woman” she beamed at her wife. “And she’s all mine.”

“Thank you honey” Ali turned and kissed her wife’s lips with a smile. She couldn’t remember the last time she drank whiskey and didn’t end up fucking the sexy blonde.

“Anyway” Whitney paused, waiting to get their attention back. “That’s how the idea of secret passages came up and the only one we could think of that would work was my bathroom and bedroom as a secret passage into her bedroom.”

“Well, that explains that then” Hannah sighed and rolled her eyes. “I must have just missed her. I was afraid she would wake the baby up so I hustled right down there.”
“Just a minute too soon” Deb chuckled. “She and the dogs were probably cutting through the bathroom as you looked into the nursery. Ah, kids. You’ve gotta love ‘em.”

They all felt better with the mystery solved and sat up for a few more minutes finishing their whiskey and giggling. Some women had coffee clatches in the mornings and shared stories about their children and families. These women had their very own whiskey clatch in the middle of the night instead and not one of them thought it was odd.
Ashlyn’s soccer camp started painfully early the next morning, as far as the keeper was concerned. Their middle of the night whiskey clatch weighed heavily on all of them Sunday morning. This was the biggest camp they had out of all eight of them on the schedule so far. The keeper was pretty popular and well-known on the North Shore so this camp in Ipswich was very well-attended. Ashlyn had roped Whitney, Niki and Sydney into helping her for the day. She had to promise them a quick trip to the beach and then a big seafood dinner back at the house but it was well worth it when she saw how great they all were with the campers. It was easily Ashlyn’s favorite camp ever. Part of that was because Meg was there, but part of it was because of all the great people around her. Marcy and Paula came to run the admissions portion of the morning and help wrangle the sixty boys and girls aged seven to ten years old. They each took fifteen campers to start the day and then rotated through so everybody got a chance to be coached by Ashlyn Harris.

Sunday was also the day that Mike was flying back to Miami and Hannah was flying to NYC. Hannah had a quick goodbye with Meg before she left for camp that morning, and then a black town car came and drove her to the airport. She offered to take Mike too but his flight was a few hours later so he declined. For the first time ever, Ali was almost sad to see the redhead go. It didn’t last long though. She shook the warm, fuzzy feeling off and chalked it up to the whiskey from the night before. After driving Mike to the airport with Deb and Drew that afternoon, Ali drove her truck up to Ipswich to watch the end of Ashlyn’s camp. It was another beautiful day and they set up a big blanket with a shade tent and a small cooler of drinks and snacks and watched the campers go about their business. After an hour of watching Meg outperform almost all of the other seven-year olds and some of the eight-year olds, the brunette put Drew down for a nap in the shade tent. She and her mother sat side by side and grinned at Ashlyn having so much fun with all the kids.

“She’s just a big kid you know” Deb chuckled without looking away from the scene in front of them.

“Oh I’m aware” Ali agreed and rolled her eyes. “We’ve already started talking about not making me the bad guy every single time when it comes to this one” she nodded over her shoulder towards the shade tent. “It’s going to be a disaster and I may lose my mind.”

“Well, as long as you know what you’re in for” Deb giggled and nudged her daughter’s shoulder. Sandi arrived with Cash and joined them to watch the last hour of camp.

“So why aren’t you out there Miss Thing?” Sandi asked, looking at Ali with a smile. “Syd says you helped out a couple of years ago but haven’t been back since.”

“Yeah, well, last year I was too busy with the MBA and this year I’ve got him so...” Ali passed along the half-truths and hoped the subject would just go away.

But Sandi knew Ali just as well as Deb knew Sydney and she didn’t just let it go. After a few more probing questions and just as many non-committal answers from the brunette, Deb spoke up.

“She’s not ready yet. And when she is, then she’ll be out there where she belongs.”

Ali basked in the protection from her mother for a minute before looking sheepishly at Sandi. The older woman reached over and patted Ali’s arm, as half apology and half encouragement. Then she looked at Deb and smiled warmly.
“Well that sounds like a good plan.”

As camp ended they watched a busier and more chaotic version of what Ali and Sydney had seen the last time as Marcy and Ashlyn tried to coordinate the pictures. Paula stayed distant, working or playing on her phone as long as she could until Marcy called her name and forced her to get involved.

“Who the hell is that?” Deb asked and gave her old friend a worried look.

“Paula, the summer intern” Ali answered, already dreading what was coming next. “She’ll be gone at the end of the month, so just save your breath. I’m aware that she has some sort of crush on my wife. The good news is that Ashlyn hasn’t figured it out yet.”

“Why is that good news?” Sandi asked.

“Because she’ll just keep acting normally if she doesn’t know about it. If she realizes Paula has a crush on her she’ll get weird about it and probably say something that will encourage her, or worse.”

“She does have a knack for saying the wrong thing when she’s nervous” Deb chuckled. Having lived with them in the big old house for almost two months, Deb had heard enough to be able to back up her statement, and then some. “She doesn’t mean to, and she sure can’t help herself.”

“I know” Ali smiled softly as she thought about the woman she loved so much. “It’s like her mouth just gets disconnected from her brain for a few minutes and the worst things come out.”

Sure enough, they watched Paula worm her way so she was right next to Ashlyn, who, as usual, was oblivious to her flirtatious actions. It wasn’t just Paula. Ashlyn was nice and kind and easy to talk to so she just assumed that’s all anybody else wanted from her. It had been a problem for her all her life and her friends and family knew about it and did their best to protect her from those that were trying to take advantage. Ali smiled when she saw Niki and Whitney take notice of the situation. Sydney and Marcy had already witnessed some of Paula’s previous attempts to get close to the keeper and were unfazed by it this time. They didn’t like it, but their mouths weren’t hanging open like Niki and Whitney’s were that late afternoon. The pictures were taking way too long and Ali sat there as long as she could before she got involved to streamline the task and move everything along twice as fast. Marcy was quick to follow her lead and the two of them had the job done in about twenty minutes. As the campers left the pitch and parking lot Ashlyn gave her friends hugs for helping out. Paula made sure to get a nice, long, touchy hug in before Whitney unapologetically broke it up with a hand around Ashlyn’s shoulder and a glare at the interloper.

When they got back to the house everybody that was going swimming changed into their bathing suits and headed to the beach for about an hour before dinner. Ashlyn, Niki and Meg were the first three to leave and Meg ran ahead of the two women once they started their walk.

“Not too far Meg. And stop at the end of the street” Ashlyn yelled.

“O-kay” came the sing song reply.

Niki didn’t waste any time.

“What the hell is going on with you and that intern?” she spoke in a quiet but urgent voice as they walked.

“What are you talking about?” Ashlyn replied as she scrunched up her face in confusion. “Paula?”
“Yes, Paula” Niki continued, looking over her shoulder to see if anybody else had left the house yet. “She’s all over you like, like, a fucking hooker for Christ’s sake.”

“No she’s not” the keeper was indignant as she looked at her friend and frowned. “She’s just trying to help out. She’s alright.”

“Ash, dude, I’m telling you. I know you don’t see it. But she’s coming for you and you’d better do something about it before she does and there’s a whole shitstorm coming down on you.”

“Hey guys, wait up!” came a voice behind them.

Niki turned around to see Paula jogging towards them, big breasts bouncing all over the place in her tiny, orange, thong bikini.

“Jesus Christ. Nip this in the bud now. Trust me” Niki whispered tersely as Ashlyn turned around and gave the intern a friendly smile.

After an hour at the beach, everybody came back to the house and got changed again. Deb and Sandi had gone to pick up the food from the best seafood shack in town, only after promising to use Ali’s credit card to pay for it. The brunette was going to go pick it up with her mom but Deb had told her to stay at the house because she and Sandi wanted to go get it.

“Just let them go” Sydney said as Ali tried to protest. “You need to be here now anyway” the coach said seriously to her best friend. “You would not believe how bold that bitch was all day today.” Sydney shook her head and set her jaw as she spoke. “I almost took care of her myself. Fucking twat.”

“Was she that bad?” Ali asked, her eyes wide as her stomach lurched at the thought of Paula being inappropriate with her clueless wife all day long. “Really?”

“I kid you not boo. She was fucking her with her eyes and every chance she got to be near her, she was right there. Handsy as fuck too. I thought Whit was going to have an aneurysm.”

Ali narrowed her eyes and felt the anger rising through her body. She took a few deep breaths.

“They’ll be home any minute” the brunette replied. “Niki, Whitney, Marcy and Molly were all down at the beach with them. And Meg and Noah were there. You don’t think she’d try anything with all those people there do you? And Ash is always playing with the kids...she wouldn’t even see Paula...”

“Al, did you see what she had on when she left the house?” Sydney’s eyes were big and she quirked an eyebrow at her best friend.

“Ok, yeah. I’ll talk to her when they get back.”

“Don’t talk to her. Get her the hell out of your house.”

“Well I can’t just kick her out, she drove up with Marcy.”

The beach group started coming back to the house and the first person in the mudroom door was Molly. She walked directly into the kitchen, where Ali and Sydney were talking and met the brunette’s eyes.

“Al, you’ve got a problem” she said seriously.
“Yeah, I know, and it’s wearing an orange bikini” Ali sighed and rolled her eyes. “I’ll talk to Ash first, as soon as she goes upstairs. If Drew…”

“We’ll take care of it” Molly answered, looking at Sydney who nodded her head.

The beachgoers stopped outside the mudroom door and rinsed off with the spray hose. Then they dried off and went to one of the bathrooms and got changed out of their bathing suits. Molly told Niki and Whitney to take Noah and Meg to the second-floor bathroom to get them rinsed off and changed. Whitney hesitated for a second before doing what was asked of her. Ashlyn looked confused but figured Molly must have had her reasons. Ali, Sydney and Molly went back and started setting up the dining room for dinner and figuring out how many people needed to sit at the nook. Marcy went into the first-floor bathroom to change. Paula went up the front stairs after Niki, Whitney and their charges. Ashlyn walked through the kitchen and went up the backstairs to the master bedroom. The keeper really wanted to take a shower but didn’t want to leave Ali downstairs with all the work to do. Her shower would have to wait.

As you entered the master bedroom from the second-floor hallway door there was about ten feet of narrow space until you got to the main room that opened up. Ashlyn’s closet was on the left and there were two big dressers on the right as you moved through that ten-foot space inside the door. The foot of the bed was just to the left, with the head of the bed in front of you along the back wall of the room. The fireplace was along the wall to the right, and Ali’s closet was in the back right corner of the room with the baby bassinette in front of it. The door to the backstairs was in the back left corner of the room, with the other gliding rocking chair and stool in front of it. If you turned to the left when you got to the foot of the bed, the door to the master bathroom was on the left and then the dressing table was in the corner of the room.

Ashlyn took her board shorts and bikini top off, dropping them on the vanity between the two sinks in the master bathroom. She would rinse them out later too. Her main goal was to get downstairs and get Meg fed and help Ali with everything else. She knew Deb was there and lots of other people to help, but they had all helped her at camp all day. She wanted to be the one doing all the work that evening. The naked keeper walked across the bedroom and stood in front of her dresser, opening drawers and pulling clothes out to put on. She stepped into a pair of boxer briefs and tugged a sports bra over her head.

Downstairs, Ali looked at Sydney and started up the backstairs.

Ashlyn jumped when she heard two soft knocks on the door to the hallway. Before she could say anything or put any more clothes on, Paula, still in her tiny bikini, stepped into the room and closed the door behind her.

“Oh” she said in fake surprise. “I thought this was the bathroom.” She smiled seductively as she raked her eyes up and down the keeper’s toned, underwear-clad body. She dropped her beach bag and moved closer to the blonde, licking her lips and staring hotly at her gorgeous body. She reached behind her back as she walked and untied her bikini top, letting her large breasts drop out of it. She untied the strings behind her neck and pulled the top all the way off. “Do you mind if I get changed in here? All the other rooms are taken” she purred as she kept moving closer.

“Paula, listen, I don’t know what you think is going to happen here, but it’s not going to happen.” She kept slowly backing up as the intern continued her approach. “You can change in here if you want, I’m almost done.”

Ali was almost at the top of the backstairs. She had stopped when she heard voices in the master bedroom. The door at the top of the backstairs was open, as it usually was unless they were in there together or the baby was sleeping in his bassinette in there, so Ali could hear every word. Her
blood boiled and her heart raced with fury as she stood there, fists clenched by her sides and nostrils flaring like some wild beast. She was trying to calm herself down enough so she could go in there and confront the stupid intern bitch without murdering her.

“That’s too bad” Paula ran her hands down her own sides and then up under her voluptuous breasts as she kept moving towards her target. “I was just a minute too late. That’s ok, you look really sexy. Mmmmm hmmmmmm” she moaned and bit her bottom lip. “Let me just get out of these and we can see what happens” she oozed out as she started to move her thumbs to the thin strings at her hips.

“Paula” Ashlyn had backed up all the way to the foot of the bed. She felt it hit the back of her knees and silently cursed her situation. “I told you. Nothing is going to happen here. I don’t know why in the world you think it would, but I’m telling you – nothing is going to happen here.”

Paula’s eyes flashed with excitement when she saw that the keeper was backed up against the bed. She took another step with her long, beautiful legs and tried to wrap her arms around Ashlyn’s neck.

“I know you want me. You’ve wanted me since you first saw me. It’s all over your face. The way you talk to me and flirt with me. Well, I’m here now and you can have me.”

“Stop it!” Ashlyn’s voice was stronger and louder than it had been thus far and she grabbed Paula’s wrists and held them tightly. “I don’t know if you’re stupid or deaf, but this is not happening. Not now. Not ever.” She flung the interns wrists down and away from her and levelled her with a hard stare. Paula laughed, a low and throaty laugh, throwing her head back and making her breasts bounce.

“What? Are you telling me you’re going to pass on all of this? No way, I don’t believe it.” She tried again to put her arms around the keeper but Ashlyn stopped her again. “There’s no way you’re getting any from that uptight wife of yours, especially not after just having a damned baby.” The intern laughed again, but this time it was full of meanness. “You must be just dying for some of this” she pressed her body up against the keeper’s and tried to straddle one of her thighs.

Ashlyn grabbed her wrists again and jerked them down hard. Paula seemed surprised at how strong the keeper was and she squealed with excitement.

“Oooh, you like it a little rough huh, that’s good baby.”

“That’s enough” Ashlyn, still holding her wrists, pushed her back a good two feet with one strong shove. “Put your top back on and get the fuck out of here. The only reason I’m not dragging you out of here by your hair right now is because there are kids right outside that door and they don’t need to see something so trashy. Now quit messing around and put your goddamned top back on.” She released the intern’s wrists with another push.

“You’re really kicking me out?” she asked as if it was the first time in her life someone had ever rejected her.

“Oh, so you’re finally starting to get it. Good. It’s about fucking time” Ashlyn snarled at her as she walked past her. She pulled a tank top out of her dresser and pulled it over her head. “Hurry up” she barked as she grabbed the first pair of shorts she touched and stepped into them.

“You’re unbelievable” Paula chuckled with disdain. “You’re not going to get another shot at this so choose wisely.” She turned to face Ashlyn and the door behind her and posed again.
Ashlyn picked up her beach bag and walked it over to her, grabbing the camp t-shirt out of it and holding it out to her. She dropped the bag at her feet.

“Put some fucking clothes on right now or I’ll throw you out anyway. I’m all done with your bullshit. Hurry up!”

She yelled much too loudly for a house full of people not to hear and the ferocity of the yell made Ali jump as she stood in her spot on the backstairs.

“And just so you know, not that it’s any of your business, my wife is ten times the woman you’ll ever be, in every way. And you’re lucky she’s not here right now or she’d kick your ass all the way back to Boston and you wouldn’t even know what hit you.”

There was a knock on the hallway door and Ashlyn heard Niki’s voice.

“Ash, everything ok in there?”

“Yeah Nik, can you come in please?” the keeper replied evenly.

The door opened and Niki stuck her head in, then quickly came in and shut the door behind her, eyes bugging out of her head.

“What the fuck is going on?” she demanded, glaring at the still topless intern. “Are you fucking kidding me? You come into her fucking house and pull this shit? It was bad enough the way you behaved all day at a kids’ soccer camp, but now this too?”

Paula snatched the t-shirt out of Ashlyn’s hand and put it on, realizing the gig was up. She picked up her bag and stuffed her bikini top into it as she returned Niki’s glare.

“What do you want to do Ash?” Niki asked, still staring at the slutty intern.

“I want to go downstairs and eat with my family and friends and the people I trust. And now I need to go tell your boss that her summer intern didn’t work out and won’t be coming back.” She levelled Paula with a steely look. “Now get out of my house.”

Niki took Paula by the arm and walked her down the front stairs and out the front door, hoping to avoid everybody else in the house. Whitney met them at the bottom of the stairs and held the front door open for them.

“Cab should be here in five minutes” the defender nodded at Niki. “I’ll keep you company so you don’t have to talk to this trash while we wait.”

Ashlyn closed the bedroom door behind Niki and Paula and walked slowly back towards the bed, trying to wrap her head around what just happened. Was that real? Did that really just fucking happen? She sat on her side of the bed and leaned her elbows on her knees with her head in her hands. She took several deep breaths and tried to figure out what she was feeling. Her insides were one big mass of emotions, the most dominant ones were fury and love.

“Hey.”

She heard her favorite voice from the door to the backstairs, just two feet away from her. She lifted her head and looked at her wife. Ashlyn reached her arms out and Ali stepped into her, letting the blonde wrap her arms around her waist and pull her into a tight hug. She kissed the top of her head and moved her hands across her strong back as her own powerful and conflicting emotions swirled around her.
“I love you babe.”

Ashlyn squeezed her tighter when she heard the sweet but solemn words. She felt like she needed to cry, but no tears came. Gradually, as they held each other for a few minutes, the fury gave way to the love and the keeper looked up at her wife’s beautiful face.

“How much did you hear?”

“The whole thing, I think.”

Ashlyn’s face registered surprise.

“What didn’t you come help me?” the keeper eased up on the hug but kept her hands on Ali’s hips in front of her.

“Well” Ali started, but then stopped to think through it and make sure she answered truthfully. “At first I was so mad that I waited to try and calm down so I didn’t kill her when I went in there.”

“That must have taken a while” Ashlyn giggled, and then looked nervously at the brunette. “Is it too soon to joke?”

“I don’t know” Ali shook her head and sighed. “I have no idea what the protocol is for something like this. I just can’t believe she was so blatant about everything.” The brunette pulled her wife up so they could hug properly and kissed her lips. “I came up to tell you that I was going to talk to her and probably fire her so you wouldn’t be surprised when we sat down to dinner and she either wasn’t there or was bitchy or whatever.” Ali chuckled. “Little did I know that she was already making her move. In my own house. In my own fucking bedroom!”

“You think you were surprised” Ashlyn raised her eyebrows up to her hairline and made a horrified face. “Absolutely unbelievable. And she wouldn’t fucking leave. Like, what part of ‘get the fuck out’ did she not understand?”

They hugged and kissed for a few more minutes. They heard Deb and Sandi come back with the food and knew it was time to go downstairs and rejoin their guests.

“Thank you” Ali’s voice was quiet and small and Ashlyn pulled back to look at her wife’s face, worried that something else had upset her.

“For not having sex with the skanky intern you hired?”

“Well, yes, thank you for that” the brunette chuckled. “But mostly, thank you for defending me.”

“Honey” Ashlyn cupped her wife’s face and kissed her lips gently. “I don’t even remember what I said but I meant every word of it. I was so mad at her and I still can’t believe I didn’t deck her. Man, I can’t remember the last time I was that angry. Nobody talks shit about my wife. Not ever.”

Ali brought their lips together in a deep kiss, trying to convey the depth of her feelings with her tongue and her lips.

“You were really sweet” she said softly as she moved her fingertips across her keeper’s pink lips. “I recorded the whole thing so you can hear it if you want to.”

“You recorded it?!”

“Yeah, after I came to my senses a little bit I realized she could say anything she wanted to about
what happened in there. I don’t know if she’s that twisted or not, but I wasn’t going to take that chance. So I pulled my phone out and now have a video of the floor” she chuckled. “But hopefully with good audio.”

“See?” the blonde squeezed her wife’s hands and gave her a dimpled grin. “You’re fucking awesome.”

“Food’s here!” Sydney called up the backstairs.

“Be right down” Ashlyn replied and then hugged the brunette again, kissing her neck. “Nobody talks shit about my wife.”
The fallout from the Paula mess wasn’t as bad as they expected it to be. But it wasn’t as neat as they wanted it to be either. Whitney was adamant that Ashlyn contact the Gloucester police and report the incident just in case Paula decided to concoct some insane story to make Ashlyn and Knight-Harris look bad. The keeper, of course, didn’t want to do anything so official that might antagonize the ex-intern. The damage she could do on social media was something they had to take into consideration. There was a lot to think about and it had to be done in a timely manner.

“Hey boss” Jared greeted Ali with a warm hug when he saw her enter her office the next morning. “What brings you here while you’re still supposed to be on maternity leave? And where is that cute baby?”

“Oh, I wish I didn’t have to be here this morning to be completely honest with you” Ali sighed heavily as she hung her suit jacket up on the coat rack stand in the corner behind her desk. “But Marcy somehow got Paula to agree to come in this morning for her exit interview.”

“Man, I did not see that coming” Jared whistled and raised his eyebrows. “Sucks to be you” he grinned as he leaned against her office door jamb. “Everything else ok?”

“Yes, things seem to be going great. Thanks for always doing such a good job Jared” she smiled at the talented, hard-working young man in her door.

Two hours later Ali’s phone rang and she got up, put her suit jacket on and went down to one of the small conference rooms on the first floor, right next to the main reception desk.

“Which room are we in?” she asked as she stopped at the reception desk.

“Room 1 Ms. Krieger.”

“Thank you Wendy.”

Ali closed the door of the small conference room behind her and felt a little thrill when she saw the discomfort on Paula’s face when she saw the managing partner of the company enter the room. Marcy stood up and moved towards the door to leave the room.

“I’d like you to stay Marcy” Ali asked as she sat in the chair across from the couch where Paula sat.

There was a coffee table between them and a large window just to the left of Ali’s chair. Marcy sat down next to Paula on the couch.

“Thank you for coming in Paula. Let’s get started shall we?”

The brunette was calm and cool, surprising even herself with her ability to remain professional despite the outrage she still felt towards the beautiful young woman sitting across from her. Ali
placed her phone on the coffee table between them and pressed play on the video recording she had made the evening before. Both Paula and Marcy reacted when they heard the recording. Marcy’s eyes went wide and she held her breath without even realizing she was doing it. Paula blushed deeply and dropped her eyes to her lap as she nervously wrung her hands. Ali let the whole episode run and then started to speak after it finished.

“I don’t know what you were thinking but, obviously, you’re done here at Knight-Harris. And, depending on the decisions you make in the next five minutes, you might be done here in New England.”

Paula lifted her deep green eyes and looked at the brunette. They were filled with remorse and regret and Ali thought there might be hope for the young woman yet.

“I understand” she replied seriously.

“Why did you want to do your internship here at Knight-Harris?”

“Because it’s an exciting young firm that’s growing and making a name for itself. And it’s owned and run by women, and lesbian women too.”

“And you felt like it would be a good fit for you, correct?” Ali asked, voice steady and calm.

“Yes, exactly.” Paula at least had the courage to look at her ex-employer. That was something.

“So can you explain to me how your inappropriate behavior with one of the founding partners of this firm fits into that scenario?” Ali’s voice was even, not revealing her true feelings towards the young woman.

“No, I can’t. It was...a mistake and I deeply regret my behavior yesterday.”

“Just yesterday?” Ali challenged, her voice changing just the slightest bit as her anger flared up.

“None of the other times you behaved inappropriately with my wife were mistakes? Are you sure about that?”

“Look, Ali, I’m really sorry. I misread what was going on and I made a terrible mistake and if I could go back and change it I absolutely would...”

“You would change your behavior or just the fact that you got caught behaving like a sophomoric slut in my bedroom?”

Marcy couldn’t help the tiny sound that came out of her throat as she tried to keep it together. She wanted to jump up and cheer Ali on but knew her boss didn’t need any help. She had this handled and then some. Paula looked down and her shoulders slumped as she listened to Ali’s words.

“Did you take the job so you could try and fuck my wife or did that just occur to you after you got here and met her?” Ali asked, her voice still level and cool, despite the heated words. “Now would be a very good time to start being honest with me Paula because I’m starting to get aggravated. I’m busy and I have better things to do than sit here and try to decide what I’m going to do with you and how I’m going to report back to Northeastern about your time here with us.”

That got her attention. Paula’s head snapped back up and her eyes pleaded with the brunette as she answered.

“No, I came here because I wanted to work for you and learn from you and this company. And that’s the truth.”
Ali studied the young woman’s anxious face and remembered the conversation she had had the night before with Ashlyn, Whitney and Sydney.

“I chose you for this internship because you were smart and capable and, I thought, willing to learn. I thought you could make a difference in the future, for women in this industry and the athletes and clients we represent. I thought the world could use another smart, female agent who was willing to fight for so many of the young, underrepresented female athletes out there. Was I wrong Paula? Did I waste my time on you?”

“No, you didn’t. I swear. I’ve learned so much this summer and it’s only made me want to work harder next month at school. This is what I want to do with my life and I know I can help more female athletes.” She paused, looked down for a couple of seconds and then met Ali’s eyes. “I know I fucked up. God, I don’t know what I was thinking and I’m sorry. And I understand if you need to terminate my internship.”

Marcy looked uncomfortably from one woman to the other and made some notes in the notebook in her lap. Ali pursed her lips as she thought about everything Paula had just said. She believed her. Maybe she really had just developed a crush that spiraled out of control. The brunette faulted herself for not pulling the intern out of the camp duties after the first time she saw her behavior. But, she wanted to give her a chance to redeem herself too, that’s why she had left things alone until yesterday’s camp.

“Women like you are the problem Paula and it really pisses me off. We have so much bullshit to fight through already just to survive in this industry – in most industries. We shouldn’t have to fight each other too. That’s why I’m so frustrated. You threw everything away so you could have sex with my wife. Do you understand how insane that is?”

“Yes, I have more perspective on it now...”

“So now I have to decide what to do about it and I honestly can’t make up my mind. I’m tempted to terminate immediately and tell Northeastern exactly what happened so they know who they’re dealing with. Have you pulled this crap at other places too? Is there a Human Resources folder on you that’s an inch thick and full of all kinds of bullshit and mistakes like this one?”

Paula assumed Ali’s question was rhetorical and didn’t answer it.

“Well?”

“Oh, no, I’ve never been in this situation before” she answered quickly.

“You haven’t done this before or you just haven’t been caught doing it before? Tell me the truth.”

“This is the first time I’ve ever been in this situation, period” Paula replied sincerely. “I swear.”

The brunette let an agonizing two minutes go by before she spoke again. She really did believe the young woman was telling the truth. Her body language, her eye contact, everything checked out. So she was either a complete sociopath or she was a bright and talented young woman who took a wrong turn and was trying to get back onto the right path.

“Paula” Ali leaned forward for the first time since she had entered the room. “You have the talent and the brains to really make something great for yourself. You can have a very successful and lucrative career as a sports agent if that’s what you want. The only thing that will stop you is this kind of stupid bullshit that you chose to pull here. I’ve made a point my entire working life to try and help young women in their careers whenever I was able. I’d like to do the same thing for you
now but...”

“I won’t let you down Ali. If you give me another chance, I promise, I won’t let you down again” the earnest words and the genuine look were hard to resist.

“Oh, I’m not giving you a second chance. You’re done here, as I said at the beginning of our conversation. But I really don’t want to end your career before it’s even started if I don’t have to.”

“I’ll do anything you want. What do I need to do?”

“I need you to be smarter and have some damned self-respect and be a woman who builds other women up instead of tearing them down. I need you to grow up and get your head out of your ass so you can see the world around you. Paula, you’re a gorgeous young woman and that will only help you in whatever career path you choose. But your looks are only going to last for so long. You don’t need to rely on them. You have the brains too. Start using them.”

“I will. I will. I’ve already learned so much from you. From all summer and from this meeting today.”

“That’s good” Ali nodded. “Flattery is always a good tool to use to help diffuse a sticky situation and get a good result from the person you’re flattering. The problem here is that I’m already on to you and flattery won’t work on someone who no longer trusts you or anything you say. That’s another free lesson for you right there.” The brunette took a deep breath and exhaled as she straightened up in the chair again. “I have yesterday’s incident on video and I swear to God if I hear about you doing anything remotely like this again I will end you. Do you understand me?”

“Yes. Thank you so much...”

“Don’t thank me yet. I’m terminating your internship and you haven’t completed enough days so that this will count. You’ll have to find another internship to replace this one at some point.” Ali looked at the young woman as her face fell and her shoulders slumped again. “But I won’t report you or tell them the real reason for the termination. I’ll write it up as a personal time issue that made it impossible for you to complete the necessary hours.”

“Thank you. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate that.”

“I don’t need to hear it. I need you to prove to me that I’m doing the right thing. You’d better get your act together and then keep giving back to other young women who come behind you. Become a part of the solution and learn how to be a leader. That’s how you hold up your end of the deal. Got it?”

“Yes” the relief on her face was easy to see.

“And just so you know, it’s impossible to run a successful company like this and not have at least half of the world think you’re stiff or a bitch or whatever. But you wouldn’t know that because you’re twenty years old and you don’t know the first thing about anything yet.”

Paula looked down, clearly remembering the way she had described and put Ali down when she had talked to Ashlyn the evening before.

“Marcy has the paperwork for you to sign and then you’ll be escorted out of the building” Ali said as she stood up.

Paula and Marcy both stood up in response and the ex-intern stuck her hand out towards Ali, hoping for a handshake. But the brunette looked down at it and turned and walked out of the room
without another word.

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Ali spent the better part of the day in the office, secretly enjoying the new space and her new desk and the bustling company. She missed her baby and knew she wasn’t anywhere near ready to go back to work, but the day had been a nice distraction and a preview of what was to come in another few months. She pumped twice while she was in her office and then headed back to the big old house in the mid-afternoon. As she walked into the mudroom and put her briefcase, purse, and pump bag down on the desk she was struck by the eerie quiet that filled the house.

“Hello?” she called out quietly.

When she got no answer she shrugged and thought about going for a swim to try and beat the heat of the afternoon. She put her breastmilk in the refrigerator and before she could make any decisions she heard the scurrying of paws coming down the backstairs. A few seconds later Persey, Fred and Ashlyn greeted her in the kitchen with a combination of whines, wags, licks and kisses.

“Wow” the keeper exhaled after they shared a quick kiss. She held her wife at arm’s length and looked her up and down in her nice business suit. The skirt fell just above her knees and showed off her gorgeous legs and made Ashlyn’s mouth water. “Look at you” she said as she devoured her wife with her eyes. “Damn you look so hot.”

She brought their lips together in a slow kiss that quickly deepened when she shoved her tongue into Ali’s mouth and pulled her tight against her body. Her hands worked all over the back of the suit jacket and down to her sexy ass where they settled and squeezed all through the passionate kiss.

“Where is everybody?” Ali panted out as she leaned her forehead against the blonde’s and tried to catch her breath.

“Your mom took Drew to visit some of her friends in Ipswich. She said she cleared that with you” the keeper said in a rush, between breaths. “And Whit took Meg to the beach while I iced my shoulder. I just finished up.”

Which explained why she was in her board shorts and bikini top with a towel thrown over her shoulder.

“What happened to your shoulder” Ali asked as she began kissing her wife’s neck, moving her lips up to her ear and then down along her jawline towards her delicious mouth. “Are you ok?”

“Just a little stiff but Dani made me promise to ice it as soon as I got home and Whit heard her so...”

Ali’s eager mouth ended the conversation and swallowed a loud moan from the blonde in her arms. They kissed again and Ashlyn’s hands started to roam. They untucked the brunette’s blouse, unzipped her form-fitting skirt and found soft, warm, inviting flesh underneath. She pulled Ali’s body up against her own as tightly as she could, moaning again when she felt her core start to twitch. The brunette had one hand massaging Ashlyn’s breast while the other one had slipped inside her board shorts and was scratching and grabbing at her bare ass.

“Jesus you feel good” she groaned and then attacked the other side of Ashlyn’s neck with her talented mouth.

The keeper tried to unbutton the blouse and tugged on the material.
“Don’t rip anything” Ali panted out as they kissed again. “It’s the only thing that fits me right now.”

“I can’t make any promises...”

Ali bit her lip, hard.

“Ow! Ok, ok” the blonde grinned into the next kiss.

They were both panting and overheated and incredibly turned on. Ali could feel the passion pooling between her legs already and Ashlyn’s clit felt like it was going to explode from the pressure from Ali’s hip pressed into it. The keeper finally got the buttons undone on Ali’s blouse and moved her hands all over the newly exposed skin.

“So soft...” she murmured between kisses down her wife’s neck.

Ashlyn pushed the blouse and the suit jacket over Ali’s shoulders at the same time and the brunette dropped her arms down to her sides to let them fall to her hands. Instead of letting the garments drop to the floor, she tossed them over the chair at the small kitchen table. She added Ashlyn’s towel, bikini top and board shorts to the pile and then held her breath as the keeper walked her back a few steps and pressed her hard against the kitchen door. The curtain that covered the top, glass half of the door moved in and out behind them as they banged into the door again and again while they made out and groped each other.

“Fuck, yes...” Ali exhaled as her desire soared from the rough contact with the door.

The keeper tugged her wife’s skirt down past her hips and thick thighs and let it drop to the floor as she kissed the tops of Ali’s breasts and moaned into them. She used her hands to tug down the pantyhose next, slowly dropping to her knees in front of her wife and pressing kisses all down her stomach and hips. She could smell Ali’s passion as she moved her lips across her panties, kissing her clit through the pale purple cotton material and loving the way the brunette groaned. Ashlyn didn’t waste any time. This was not going to be a leisurely dalliance. They were going to fuck against the kitchen door before anybody came home to interrupt them. She pulled Ali’s panties down to her ankles and helped her step out of the pantyhose and the panties. Then, because she knew Ali would be worried about it, she picked up the pile of clothes and placed them on the counter next to them, making sure the skirt wasn’t too balled up.

“I fucking love you so much” Ali husked out as she grabbed two fistfuls of blonde hair and pulled Ashlyn’s face to her needy clit.

The keeper pushed Ali back against the door again and started licking and sucking all around her clit while she grabbed the brunette’s sexy ass with her left hand and teased her entrance with her right.

“Unnhhh” she gasped when she hit the door again and then moaned loudly as Ashlyn started to work on her clit. “Oh my God, yes babe...mmmmm...”

Ashlyn loved the way she held her head against her clit and started grinding against it. Fuck this was hot. She carefully spread Ali’s juices around, making sure everything was wet. Because she was still breastfeeding, Ali didn’t get as wet as she used to. The doctor said it would go back to normal after she stopped breastfeeding and not to worry about it in the short term. But Ashlyn was always concerned about hurting her wife. Thrusting without lube or juices never felt good, no matter how much you loved the person. But everything felt wet enough and the keeper pushed one long finger into Ali’s core as the brunette moaned again.
“More, please Ash, more...” she begged.

Ashlyn slowly added a second finger and everything still felt wet enough so she started slowly thrusting in and out. Her lips and tongue on her quivering clit were making Ali crazy and she was still trying to grind against the blonde’s face.

“Mmmmmmmmm” Ashlyn hummed against the sensitive nub, making her wife squeal with delight.

She felt Ali’s thigh twitch against her cheek and knew her orgasm wouldn’t take very long. Ashlyn increased her thrusting speed and went as deep as she could on every other stroke. She looked up and saw that the brunette had moved one of her hands to try and hold her large breasts in place, still inside her nursing bra but bouncing around as she thrusted inside her. The keeper readied herself to try and hold up her wife when she came. She tightened her grip with her left arm and moved her hand down around the back of Ali’s strong thigh. She thrusted even faster and began flicking her tongue across the brunette’s clit.

“Unnnhhh, oh yeah, fuck...babe...mnmnmnmnmnm...”

“Come for me baby, I’ve got you” Ashlyn squeezed her left arm to show Ali and then put her mouth right back on her aching clit. “You can let go...”

Another minute of thrusting and several more firm flicks of her tongue brought Ali over the edge. She yelled a stream of curses and groans as she came hard in Ashlyn’s arms. Her body doubled over as the orgasm surged through her body, making it shake and quiver and convulse. The keeper moved her mouth over to the inside of her thigh and bit down softly as she continued to slowly pump her fingers inside Ali’s constricted core. The brunette wrapped an arm around Ashlyn’s head and hugged her tightly as she rode out her release, still holding her own breasts with her other arm.


“It looked and tasted amazing too” her keeper purred into her thigh and then kissed her way back up Ali’s body. “You’re incredible Al.”

As soon as the brunette felt like she could stand on her own two wobbly legs she made her way up the backstairs. Ashlyn followed with all of their clothes, dropping them into the glider chair by the bed before wrapping her wife up in another passionate kiss.

“God, I could spend the rest of the damned day and night like this with you” Ali husked out.

“But we need to move things along, I know” Ashlyn finished the thought. “I’m more than ready baby. I was wet as soon as I saw you in your sexy suit. God you get me so fucking worked up.”

“What do you want me to do you” the brunette asked with desire dripping through her low, hungry voice. Her hands caressed Ashlyn’s breasts as they stood together by the bed and moved down her sides to her hips and the very top of her dark curls. “Where do you want my mouth?”

The keeper swallowed and tried to get her brain to work, but it was no use. She was so turned on that she could barely form a cogent thought, forget about complete a sentence. She groaned as she felt the goosebumps erupt on her skin in the wake of Ali’s soft, strong hands. They didn’t have time for this indecision, they both knew that. Ali’s breasts hurt less if she was laying down so she pulled the covers down the bed and jogged to lock the door to the hallway. Ashlyn followed her lead and locked the door to the backstairs too, just in case. When she turned back around to face the bed she watched her beautiful wife crawl up to the pillows and lie flat on her back. Ali reached for the blonde and Ashlyn got on the bed, straddling the brunnete’s hips. Ali moaned and closed her
eyes momentarily when she felt her wife’s juices, cool now from the air and lack of contact, against her lower abdomen. It only took a few seconds for everything to be warm and then hot again as Ashlyn started sliding her wet core against her wife’s bare skin. Ali loved the way the coarse curly hair between her keeper’s legs scratched against her warm flesh. She reached behind the blonde and started pulling her up towards her chest, squeezing her sexy ass as she did so.

“Come up here” she husked out. “I need to taste you right now.”

Ashlyn let her wife pull her up as Ali slid down a little bit so there was more room between her head and the headboard. The keeper was careful around Ali’s breasts as she re-positioned herself so her knees were on either side of the brunette’s head. The hungry look in Ali’s eyes was almost enough to make her come, just like that. Those gorgeous, whiskey colored eyes told Ashlyn everything she ever needed to know about her wife. All she had to do was look into them and tune everything else out and she would know what was in the brunette’s heart at that very moment. And at that particular moment, Ali’s hands were making it crystal clear as they grabbed her hips and pulled her down on to her face. Her tongue made one long, strong stroke from bottom to top and then she swirled it around Ashlyn’s throbbing clit a couple of times. She locked her lips around it and sucked hard, making the blonde whimper as she clung to the headboard for support, already feeling weak in the knees.

“Shit, that’s so good baby” the keeper’s voice was low and thick with want.

The brunette pressed her face deep into her wife’s wet folds and moaned loudly as she licked and sucked all through the delicious flesh. She pulled Ashlyn’s hips down even farther and hummed into her pussy when she felt her wife start to grind against her face.

“Mmmmmm...mmmmmmm...”

Ali moved one hand up to squeeze the blonde’s breasts and tug on her stiff nipples, alternating from one to the other as her lithe but strong body moved above her. The brunette groaned with pleasure when she felt a new gush of passion on her lips.

“Mmmmmmmmmm...”

She made one last, long sucking trek up and back and then plunged her firm tongue as deep as it would go inside her silky walls.

“Unnnhhhh” Ashlyn grunted as her legs trembled. “Fuck yes...oh, baby, fuck...don’t stop.”

Ali’s loud, urgent moans and hums were driving Ashlyn almost as crazy as the strong thrusts from her hot fucking tongue. Every swirl and flick and thrust brought her closer to her release and she felt the very first stirrings of her orgasm deep in her belly.

“Oh God” she moaned and brought one of her hands to her own clit and started rubbing it hard and fast. “Oh fuck. Mmmmm...Unnhhhhhh...”

Ali felt another wave of her own juices pool between her legs and she pressed her thighs together hoping to find some relief from the aching of her own clit. She felt like she was chasing her own orgasm as she helped Ashlyn close in on hers. The brunette moved her face back and forth as her tongue kept thrusting and trying to hit her keeper’s g-spot.

“Yessssss, Jesus that feels good. Unnhhhh...fuck yes.”

Ali’s right hand pinched her wife’s pretty pink nipples harder, one then the other and back. Her left hand scratched and grabbed Ashlyn’s hip and her ass, then she smacked the blonde’s ass and made
her cry out.

“Oh! Fuck yeah...unnnh, I’m coming!” she shouted, her eyes squeezed shut and her fingers rubbing hard on her own clit.

The brunette felt the orgasm hit her keeper and make everything shake and jerk in her mouth and her hands. Ashlyn stopped rubbing her clit and held onto the headboard with both hands as her body convulsed forward and started shaking. Ali kept licking her folds and lapped up all of the passion that spilled there. She turned her head slightly and nipped at the skin of her thigh, then licked the spot and went back to the soft, soaked folds with her tongue.

“Yessssss!” Ashlyn groaned out as she came undone and let her body collapse forward against the headboard. “Jesus. Fucking. Christ” she gasped out each word separately as she rolled off of her wife and dropped herself down on the bed next to her.

Her body kept twitching as she came down from her high and she slowly became aware of Ali moving beside her. She opened her eyes and saw her beautiful brunette with her eyes closed, her head tilted back into the pillow and her mouth open and panting. Ashlyn lifted her head and moaned without even realizing she was doing it. Ali was rubbing her own clit, one leg bent up at the knee, and holding on to her bouncing breasts with her other hand.

“Damn, baby” the keeper groaned and moved down enough so she could put two fingers inside her wife’s writhing body.

She heard Ali moan and it only took a few seconds of thrusting before she came again. The orgasm hitting her hard and making all her muscles tense and release as she rolled over onto her side towards the blonde. Ali stopped rubbing her clit and used that hand to still Ashlyn’s hand inside her as she came.

“Mmmmmm” she hummed as her body shook. “Yes babe, yes!”

Ashlyn pulled her fingers out of her wife and wrapped her up in an embrace. They were lying on their sides and panting as the keeper slid her leg in between Ali’s still quivering thighs. She pulled her tightly to her chest and let Ali put her head on top of hers so she could catch her breath.

“Holy shit” the brunette panted out. “Sorry about that, I couldn’t help it” she chuckled and kissed her wife’s neck as she pulled her head back to look at the blonde. “I thought I was going to come before you did” she smiled shyly at the love of her life gazing back at her. “You get me so worked up Ash.”

“Mmmmm, I know the feeling” she grinned back at her.

“Do you want to come again?” Ali kissed her lips slowly and nuzzled her nose against her soft cheek. “It would be my pleasure” she purred.

“Clearly” Ashlyn teased with a giggle.

“I didn’t mean it like that you jerk” Ali giggled too and then kissed her wife’s lips again.

The dogs started barking and whining downstairs and the women knew their time was up.

“Rain check?” the keeper asked softly as she brushed some long dark hair over Ali’s shoulder.

“Yes. Tonight. Wake me up” she replied with a sweet kiss.
“Ok baby.”

“No, I mean it Ashlyn. Wake me up or I’ll be really upset.”

“It’s ok honey...”

“No, it’s not ok” Ali pulled back and looked at her wife seriously. “We have to make time for this or it’s not going to happen. It has to be a priority or it’ll keep getting pushed aside. I know I’m always tired or sleeping or feeding the baby these days but you need to know that I still want to be with you like this as often as possible. I need you and this more than ever now...it helps me feel like...me.”

Ashlyn saw how important this was to her brunette and she let a minute go by before questioning her about it.

“Do you not feel like you all the time?”

Ali sighed and closed her eyes.

“We don’t really have time to talk about this right now and I’m still figuring it out” she sat up and adjusted her nursing bra, straightening it out at the bottom and untwisting one of the straps. “But no. I don’t.”

“Honey, what’s going on?” Ashlyn sat up, concerned.

“Oh it’s ok” Ali soothed. “It’s normal I guess, that’s what Mattie says anyway.”

“You talked to Mattie about it?” Ashlyn couldn’t hide the fear in her voice.

“Sweetheart, I promise you I’m ok” she patted her wife’s thigh as she moved towards the edge of the bed to get up. “It’s not postpartum depression or anything serious. I shouldn’t have said anything. It’s just me being weird about being a new mom and trying to cling to our old life.” She leaned over and kissed the worried blonde. “I promise it’s ok.”

“Hello!” came Whitney’s voice from downstairs in the kitchen. “We’re home!”

“But why did you say it then? It must be bothering you a lot for you to say that” Ashlyn challenged.

“Be right down!” Ali yelled towards the backstairs door as she stood up and walked to the bathroom. “Get dressed babe, Meg will be up here any minute.”

The keeper knew her wife was right but she didn’t want to let the conversation end either. She hurriedly went to the dresser and got dressed, unlocking the hallways door while she was over there. She hastily made the bed and unlocked the backstairs door as Ali came out of the bathroom and put on some shorts and a nursing tank top. Ashlyn waited for her to get dressed and then hugged her as she approached the door to the backstairs.

“I want you to tell me what’s going on Al. I trust you that it’s nothing serious, but I still want to know about it.” She kissed her lightly on the lips and smirked when she tasted toothpaste instead of herself. “I should brush my teeth” she chuckled. “Come talk to me until we get interrupted.”

She pulled Ali by the hand into the bathroom and brushed her teeth, listening to the brunette try to explain her feelings.
“I just...sometimes I feel like everything is so different and it’s not real or it’s not my life or he’s not my beautiful boy...” she paused and watched the blonde’s face for some reaction. Ashlyn just studied her, listening and waiting for her to continue. “Being with you, the way we always have been, just the two of us, feels like me. It feels familiar and right and normal...and safe.”

Ashlyn finished brushing her teeth and wiped her mouth on the hand towel as she thought about what her beautiful brunette was trying to express. She went and sat next to her on the edge of the tub and held her hand.

“I feel like that too” she admitted in a small voice. “I’m so glad he’s here and I’ve really never been happier in my entire life...” her eyes went wide when she realized that her words might be misinterpreted.

“No, it’s ok” Ali squeezed her hand. “I know exactly what you mean. This really has nothing to do with him. He’s perfect and amazing and I don’t really want to go back to our life without him – not for a second. But this new life just doesn’t feel normal to me yet.”

“Yes!” Ashlyn grinned, relieved that her wife knew what she meant and also that she had just put the words to it for them both. “That’s absolutely what I mean and what it feels like. It’s so fucking weird sometimes and I wasn’t always sure what it meant but I think you just hit the nail on the head baby. I don’t want our old life back. I love our new life and our new baby boy more than I ever thought I possibly could. But I want our new life to feel like our old life did. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, it does” Ali leaned her head against her wife’s strong shoulder for a few seconds. “I’m glad you’re feeling it too. It makes me feel like less of a freak” she admitted with a chuckle.

“Well that’s why we need to talk about these things” Ashlyn said softly as she kissed the side of Ali’s head.

“That’s what I was trying to say about waking me up tonight. These times when it’s just the two of us is when those things come out. When we’re intimate and exposed and we feel like we can tell each other anything. It’s not just the sex, although sometimes it can be just about the sex” she giggled and kissed her keeper’s cheek. “We don’t have to psychoanalyze each other every time we fuck.” She moaned into the kiss that her wife gave her and smiled against her lips.

They could hear Meg’s feet coming up the backstairs as well as the dogs’ paws.

“No, let’s not do that” Ashlyn grinned again and gave her another quick kiss. “But I get it now. We need to make time for us, no matter how hard it is to do sometimes when we’re both tired and busy and whatever else. I’ll wake you up tonight. I promise.”

“I love you Ashlyn.”

“I love you too honey.”
The rest of Ashlyn’s off week and Meg’s visit went pretty smoothly and very quickly. Whitney had
gone to western New York to visit Ryan Tuesday morning and didn’t come back until Sunday
afternoon. Ali and Ashlyn had just decided to let Meg sleep in her old twin bed in the nursery for
that one last visit. Ashlyn talked with her about how to make the front bedroom better for her next
summer, hoping that by involving her she would embrace the change. The little girl had a couple of
meltdowns during the week and they both involved sharing the two women with the baby. She was
usually very good with baby Drew and she enjoyed helping take care of him. But every once in a
while she had a fit because Ashlyn was holding him and couldn’t do whatever it was she wanted
her to do at that exact moment. Meg had to go into timeout three different times and she even had
to miss a day at the beach as punishment on Friday, which was her last full day with Ashlyn that
vacation. Going through with that punishment was one of the hardest things the keeper ever had to
do and both Deb and Ali felt awful for her. But Meg had a temper and she had to learn to control it.
Hannah and Ashlyn had talked about it at length and Hannah begged the keeper to be stricter with
the little girl.

“She looks up to you so much and she just thinks you’re perfect and can do no wrong” Hannah’s
voice implored through the phone early in July.

“I knew she was a smart kid” Ashlyn chuckled.

“I’m serious Ash. She sees you as her own personal playmate and best friend, and that’s wonderful
for you. But the rest of us still have to try and teach her how to behave and be a decent human
being.”

“I make her behave...”

“I’m not criticizing you. I’m asking for your help. I could ask her to do something ten different
times and she still wouldn’t do it. You ask her to do it once and she does it. I know a big part of it
is that you two don’t see each other that often so it’s not a fair comparison. But the fact is she will
listen to anything you say a lot better than anything anyone else will try to teach her. So if she
misbehaves while she’s with you please don’t go easy on her. And for God’s sake don’t threaten a
punishment and then not follow through.”

“But I always...”

“You’re not doing anything wrong. But if you do things a little bit better when it comes to her
behavior it will make a huge difference. I promise you. Please, just trust me.”

“But I don’t like to punish her. We get so little time together I don’t want to waste it with her in a
timeout.”

“Well that’s too fucking bad, isn’t it” Hannah’s words were sharp for the first time.

“Why are you getting mad at me?”

“You’ll figure this out sooner or later, and I can’t imagine Ali letting you get away with it for very
long so you may as well try and learn it now with my kid.”

“What are you talking about?” Ashlyn was getting aggravated with the conversation and the
accusations.
“Listen, nobody likes to punish their kid. Nobody. What? Do you think I like always being the bad guy? Always being the one who makes her do what she’s supposed to do and follow the rules? It sucks. I’d love to be the one who gets to play with her and have fun with her and let someone else do all the hard parts. But I don’t have that luxury. I have to be the bad guy. Do you have any idea how depressing it is to always be the one who has to say no? I don’t know how you’ve managed to hang onto the kid inside you Ash, but you have and it’s wonderful to see you playing with Meg and having fun with her and enjoying your time together. Honestly, it makes me really happy for both of you. But kids need parents, not just playmates.”

The conversation had stuck with the keeper for days. It bothered her so much that Deb finally asked her about it late one Sunday afternoon while they were all sitting in the living room together. They were watching a soccer game on the big tv and Ashlyn was unusually quiet, even though she had her baby boy on her lap, staring back at her.

“So what’s got you so deep in thought” Deb nudged her daughter-in-law’s arm from beside her on the couch. “I can see the smoke coming out of your ears you’re thinking so hard about something.”

Ashlyn blushed a little and smiled shyly at Deb and then glanced to her wife sitting next to her. Whitney turned her head from the recliner to see how the keeper was going to handle the situation. They had talked about it once last night, while they were in their hotel room in LA after the game.

“Oh, um...nothing really.”

Ali patted her thigh and lifted her head off of her shoulder to look at the side of her pink face.

“What’s up babe?” The brunette looked at Whitney and immediately knew there was something Ashlyn needed to talk about. “Come on, just tell us, maybe we can help” she encouraged with another pat of her leg.

Ashlyn slowly and shyly told them about her phone conversation with Hannah the week earlier. When she was done talking she saw Ali exchange a look with Deb.

“What was that look for?” she asked, getting defensive. “Why did you just look at your mom that way?”

“Honey, anybody that knows you won’t be surprised that you’re struggling with this. You’re such a softie. And you’re an extra big softie when it comes to kids and animals” Ali explained carefully. “It’s not a bad thing at all so don’t feel bad about it.”

“Oh, so that still doesn’t explain the look” she glanced at Whitney for support and received a thoughtful nod from the defender. “Do you think I’m not going to be a good parent? Is that what that was about?”

Ashlyn looked like she was going to cry as she turned her head from Whitney to Deb and finally to Ali.

“No, that’s not at all what any of us think” Ali started but Ashlyn interrupted her.

“Oh, so my parenting skills is something that you all talk about. It’s like, so concerning that you have to discuss it when I’m not around” she was defensive, embarrassed and pissed off.

Persey raised her head from the other side of Deb and looked at the blonde, wondering if she needed to go and comfort her. Drew squawked when his mother raised her voice and her body tensed beneath him.
“Well that’s great, I can’t even take care of my two month old son who doesn’t do anything but eat, sleep and poop. Fucking awesome” she rolled her eyes and let out a frustrated sigh as she lifted him up and tried to soothe him against her chest.

“He’s just hungry” Ali said quietly as she moved some pillows around and undid her nursing top and bra. “Calm down babe.” She reached for the baby and helped him settle in and begin nursing.

“Ashlyn it sounds like you have some worries of your own and that’s perfectly normal” Deb offered. “Nobody here thinks you’re going to be anything other than a wonderful mother. Nobody doubts you but you, I think.”

“You really think I can be a good mom?”

“I know you already are a great mom.” Deb reached for the keeper’s hand and squeezed it. “There’s nothing scarier than learning how to be a parent. Lots and lots of things about raising babies has changed over the years, but not that. New parents are always terrified” she chuckled. “I’d be more nervous if you weren’t scared” she smiled brightly at the blonde.

“The reason I looked at my mom when you said that is because I’ve been worried about you having to change the way you are with kids a little bit. Well, at least with our kids. It’s going to be hard for you and I talked with my mom about it because...well, because I love you and I worry about you sometimes.”

“What do you mean I’ll have to change the way I am with our kids?” she turned her confused face to her wife. “What kind of change?”

Persey got up and stepped gingerly across Deb’s lap so she could curl up between she and Ashlyn, with her head in the keeper’s now empty lap. Ashlyn absent-mindedly patted the dog while they kept talking.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but pretty much exactly what Hannah said to you over the phone is a conversation that I know we’re going to have over and over again while we raise our kids” Ali explained patiently.

“I’m sorry, I just love when you say ‘raise our kids’” Deb giggled and then squealed just a little bit. “I love it!”

Ali tried to give her mother a stern look but couldn’t help but smile a little when she saw how excited she was.

“I’m sorry honey” Deb apologized to her daughter and got serious again. “Keep going.”

“Hannah’s absolutely right” both Ali and Whitney winced a little bit as the brunette said those words. “You can’t just be Drew’s playmate. He can find a playmate at school. He’s going to need his mama to be better than a playmate. And, well, I think that’s going to be a hard adjustment for you hon. That’s all.” Ali patted her thigh again and gave it a little squeeze. “But I know you can do it. I’ve never doubted for a second that you can do it. If I didn’t think you’d be a great mom I’m not sure we’d be sitting here with this little guy right now.”

“Really?” Ashlyn’s eyes went wide. “You would have not had kids if you didn’t think I’d be a good parent?”

“Oh, I don’t know for sure” the brunette tried to be as honest as possible. “But if you don’t have a good partner with you then you’re basically a single parent and I saw firsthand how hard that job is” she shook her head, thinking of Sydney’s mom. “No thank you.” She paused and met her wife’s
worried eyes. “The point is we do have our beautiful boy and I do know that you’re going to be a wonderful mother.”

“Hmmm, I wonder why that sounds so familiar?” Whitney asked and quirked an eyebrow at her best friend.

“Oh have you two already had this conversation?” Deb asked with a chuckle.

“Yeah, Whit basically said what you said” she looked at her wife and smiled sheepishly. “I want to be a great parent and I’ll do whatever I have to do to make that happen” she said, very convincingly. “And I know it’ll be the hardest thing I’ll probably ever do, but it’ll be worth it if they grow up to be good human beings.”

“And your situation with Meg is a little different because you’re not officially her parent and you’re not parenting her every day. So cut yourself a little slack, ok?” Deb suggested.

“But this summer vacation with Meg will be a great time to try and see what those changes might be. Starting with punishing her even though you don’t want to” Whitney added helpfully. “She does think you walk on water so anything you say and do carries a lot more weight with her. It’s definitely time to start using your power for good.”

So that Thursday night, when Meg had a temper tantrum because she didn’t want to go to bed and wouldn’t stop throwing her books and toys around the nursery, Ashlyn asked her to stop throwing things twice and then gave her a warning after that.

“This is your warning young lady” Ashlyn said sternly as she stood in the middle of the room with her hands on her hips and frustration in her eyes. “If you throw one more thing you’re not going to the beach with us tomorrow.”

Meg’s face registered surprise at the heavy threat and then scrunched back up into the overtired, bratty visage that had been present for the past fifteen minutes. Her little hands curled into tight fists as she knelt in the middle of the twin bed, red-faced and teary-eyed. She was out of breath from crying and throwing and she sat down on her butt and slumped her shoulders in defeat. The keeper breathed a silent sigh of relief and started to relax her tense shoulders and jaw. She let a full minute go by before doing or saying anything, wanting to make sure the little girl was truly starting to settle down.

“Thank you Meggie” she said warmly as she smiled at the seven-year old’s still pouty face and took a step towards the bed. “Are you ready to read now baby girl?”

“I’m not your baby girl!” she yelled at the top of her lungs and flung ‘The Little Prince’ hardcover book at the blonde, hitting her right in the chest with it and tearing two pages in half in the process. They both had shocked looks on their faces. It would be difficult to tell which of them was more surprised by the action. Meg burst into tears and buried her face on the bed, rolling her face from side to side as she wailed. Her fists clenched two handfuls of the green and yellow quilt and her legs kicked behind her as if she was swimming. Ashlyn took a deep breath and sat at the foot of the bed, just out of reach of the distraught girl. She sat there for ten of the longest minutes of her life as she waited for Meg to calm down. What she didn’t know, was that Ali and Deb were sitting on the edge of the tub in the bathroom listening to the whole thing. They had both fought powerful urges to go in and help Ashlyn, but there was nothing anybody could do to make it better. The keeper had done everything right and now just had to wait until Meg calmed down so she could finish putting her to bed. Finally the little girl’s breathing steadied and the last of her limbs came to rest. After a few more minutes she sat up and let out a big, shaky sigh. She was surprised to see Ashlyn still
sitting there and she lowered her eyes. The blonde thought she was going to start crying again and held her breath for a minute in dread.

“You’re still here” she said in a very small voice, eyes lifting just enough to see the keeper sitting at the foot of her bed.

“I am” Ashlyn replied evenly. She smiled at the girl and reached her hand out to touch her knee. Meg didn’t pull away as the blonde rested her hand there, squeezing her knee and patting it. “I love you Meggie. And I’m glad you calmed yourself down.”

Meg looked at the blonde and held up the two pages of the book that had ripped when she had thrown it, one in each hand.

“I ripped the book” she whispered as her chin quivered. “I’m sorry.”

“Ok, well we can probably tape the pages back into the book. And thank you for apologizing” Ashlyn nodded approvingly. “What else do you need to apologize for?” she patted her knee and gave it another squeeze.

“Ummm, I’m sorry I threw things” she stammered out and took another deep breath. “I’m sorry I was fresh, and I’m sorry I didn’t go to bed.”

She looked quickly at the keeper and then back at the pages in her hands.

“You also owe me an apology for hitting me with the book” Ashlyn said, her voice still even and calm. “It really hurt a lot.”

She wasn’t kidding. The corner of the binding had hit her in the breast and if she hadn’t been so shocked she was sure she would have cried out in pain.

“I’m sorry Ashyun” Meg said in the saddest voice the keeper had ever heard her use.

“Thank you honey” she paused for a few seconds. “You did a good job apologizing. There are rules for a reason Meg. We all have to follow rules, every day, even grown-ups. When you throw things you break things and you can hurt people like yourself or someone else.”

“Like I ripped the book and hurt you” she added and looked down again.

“That’s right. And when you break the rules there are punishments. That goes for you and me and everybody. Right?”

“Ah-huh” she nodded sadly. “Now I can’t go to the beach tomorrow” she whispered and Ashlyn swore her heart broke in half.

“That’s right honey” she squeezed her knee again. “And that makes me really sad because I was really looking forward to spending tomorrow with you at the beach.”

“Me too” she sniffled as a couple of tears leaked out of her eyes.

“I’m going to go try and tape up these pages and I want you to pick up everything that you threw and put it back where it belongs” she stood up slowly. “And then we’ll read the book. Ok?”

“Ah-huh” she nodded and slid off the bed.

Ashlyn took the book and the two ripped pages and what was left of her heart and left the room. She closed the door behind her and greeted the dogs who had been shut out of the room when the
temper tantrum started. She headed for the front stairs so she could go up to her studio and try and repair the book. She was fighting back tears and was surprised when Deb and Ali came out of Whitney’s bedroom door and met her near the stairs.

“Aw honey, you did so good” Ali wrapped her heart-broken wife up in a hug and rubbed her back. “Really, really good. I’m so proud of you.”

“That was a tough one kiddo” Deb added and patted her shoulder. “You did great.”

As hard as that evening was, the next day was twice as hard as they had to enforce the punishment. They had all talked about it after Meg finally went to sleep. The original plan for the day was for all five of them to go to the beach for most of the day. Ali or Deb would come back to the big old house with the baby to make sure he didn’t get overheated and to let the dogs out, but Ashlyn and Meg were going to spend the whole day playing at the beach. And because it was Ashlyn’s last dinner of the vacation Meg got to pick the meal and it was going to be her favorite – pizza! They debated who would stay at home with Meg and exactly how much fun the day at home should be. Was the punishment not going to the beach or did it extend to not having any fun at home either?

“I feel bad” Ashlyn confessed. “You guys should go to the beach with Drew and I’ll stay here with Meg.”

“No, that’s the only thing that can’t happen” Deb said firmly. “You have to go to the beach or the punishment won’t matter nearly as much” she explained.

“Mom’s right” Ali agreed with a thoughtful nod. “You have to go to the beach, no matter what. I’ll stay home with her in the morning, no offense mom, but she knows me better.”

“None taken. I was going to suggest the same thing. We’ll all come home for lunch a little early and then we’ll switch after lunch and you three can have some nice family time” Deb smiled at the worried women. “It’s one day ladies, she’ll be fine. And hopefully she’ll learn her lesson.”

The morning went better than any of them expected. Meg was quieter and almost sullen but they all knew it was mostly embarrassment and regret. She helped Ashlyn pack up the baby’s bag as she had done a few other times that week. The keeper had a checklist that she had made from watching Ali pack the bag and they ran through it together, with Ashlyn sending Meg off to gather up a couple of things they had forgotten. After the beach contingent left the house, Ali had decided to let Meg dictate the way the morning would go. The girl’s attitude went back to being sulky after Ashlyn, Deb and Drew left for the beach. Ali had a flash of what Meg would be like as a teenager and it made her shiver. Teenagers were a whole other animal all together and the brunette was not looking forward to those difficult years. Ali cleaned up the kitchen and sat at the small kitchen table to write up the shopping list, with Fred at her feet. After ten minutes, Meg ambled in with Persey at her heels and stood shyly a few feet away from the table.

“Hi Meg” Ali smiled at the suddenly shy girl. “What are you up to?”

“Ummm, do you think maybe...” she was nervous and adorable and it took all of the brunette’s self-control not to grab the girl and run down to the beach. “Umm...could we go on an adventure?” Meg’s voice got quieter and quieter with each word and she said the last line so quickly that it took Ali a few seconds to play it over in her head so she could understand it.


They talked for a few minutes and decided that they would go to the woods again but this time they were going to be like Merida and her mom following the will o’ the wisp through the trees.
They debated whether or not to bring the dogs and ultimately decided they could be like Angus the horse and help them on their adventure. They put on sturdy sneakers and long socks for their foray into the empty lot next to the house. Meg wore her shark themed backpack and carried two water bottles and a pack of gum and some sparkly stickers that they could stick on some trees to mark their path so they didn’t get lost. Ali put Fred on his leash and out they all went through the side door in the family room. Persey didn’t need a leash if they were close to home because she stayed right with you. Fred always had to be on leash because he would go bounding after anything interesting his nose smelled or his eyes caught sight of. They adventured for a couple of hours, finally returning to the house for a bathroom break. It was 11am and Ali had to pump. She had been trying to wait for the baby to come home for lunch but her breasts were getting sore and she couldn’t wait any more.

“What’s that?” Meg asked, her eyes wide as she found Ali sitting in the nook with the pump on the table and a storage bag attached to each of her breasts.

She had turned on the tv in the living room and set Meg up watching SpongeBob SquarePants. Her job was to watch the road in front of the house for the returning beachgoers so they would know when to start getting set up for lunch. Apparently that hadn’t held her attention for more than five minutes. Ali didn’t mind explaining breastfeeding to the seven-year old, but she hadn’t discussed it with Hannah first and she wished she would have.

“That’s a breast pump and these are the little bags of milk that go in those bottles that you feed to Drew. You know how we take them out of the fridge and then put them inside the bottle?”

“Yeah” she said as she inched closer to the nook and the contraptions attached to Ali’s breasts.

“Well this is where those come from” Ali pointed at the two storage bags attached to her nipples. “Looks kind of weird doesn’t it?”

“Yeah.” Meg sat in the chair at the end of the nook table and stared. “Does it hurt?”

“Nope. When I’m finished I’ll let you feel it on your arm in you want. It feels kind of like when you put your hand on the vacuum cleaner hose and it sucks your hand in, but not as strong. Have you ever done that?”

“Ah-huh” she nodded and rested her chin on top of her arms which were folded in front of her on the table. Apparently Ali pumping was more interesting than SpongeBob. “How come Ashyun has to use the bottles and you use...” she nodded at Ali’s breast like it was a dirty word she wasn’t supposed to say.

“My breasts?”

“Yeah.”

“Only mommies who were pregnant and had the baby inside their belly can breastfeed. Other mommies, like Ashlyn, or daddies, need to use the bottle instead.”

Meg bent one arm up and propped her head against it as she stared at the bags and the tubes and the milk. She was watching the milk fill the bags like it was the most interesting thing she had ever seen. She looked adorable and Ali would have taken a picture of her but she didn’t want to make her self-conscious. Fifteen minutes later Ali shut the pump off, separated the breast shields from her nipples and detached the storage bags. It was her turn to feel self-conscious as the inquisitive little girl leaned closer to get a better look at her nipples while the brunette screwed the caps onto the storage bags. She fought the urge to cover up quickly. The last thing she wanted to do was
make Meg feel like there was something dirty or illicit about what she was doing. Breastfeeding
was a beautiful, natural thing and Ali didn’t want to make Meg feel weird about it. The dogs
barked and the mudroom door opened as Ali finished labelling the bags.

“Do you want to carry these to Ashlyn for me? You don’t have to if you don’t...”

Before she could finish, Meg took both bags carefully in her hands and started walking quickly
towards the kitchen and the mudroom beyond.

“Be careful Meg, don’t drop them” Ali called after her and chuckled.

“Thank you Meggie” Ashlyn’s voice came from the kitchen. “How did you know he would be
hungry right now?”

“I was helping Ali” she answered with a big grin.

Ashlyn stuck her head around the big fireplace and quirked her eyebrow at her wife, still sitting in
the nook and rubbing nipple cream onto her breasts. Ali rolled her eyes at the blonde and shrugged
her shoulders with a wink.

They exchanged stories as they ate lunch together, Ashlyn feeding Drew his bottle at the same
time. Deb and Ashlyn had decided, even though it caused a potential problem for the punishment
scenario, that it was too hot and humid to bring the baby back to the beach. Deb offered to keep
both kids at home with her but Ashlyn refused. There was no way they were going to make
everybody do something they didn’t want to do, just to squeeze a few more hours out of a
punishment lesson for Meg. Ali was disappointed to miss time with Ashlyn and their baby at the
beach, but she got over it quickly. The rest of the day passed easily with board games, dog walks,
pizza for dinner, and a movie before bedtime. Bedtime that night was a cakewalk.

When Ashlyn drove away in the newest Suburu sports coupe Saturday just before lunch time, Meg
cried. The keeper and Hannah had miscommunicated about the weekend. Ashlyn was scheduled to
take her third Road Trip for Suburu that Saturday. And Hannah and Dev weren’t returning from
vacation until Sunday afternoon. They talked it over and Ali agreed, happily, to keep Meg until
Sunday. That was the easy part. The hard part was telling Meg and making sure she would be ok
with it. Normally it wouldn’t have been such a big deal, but that summer Ali couldn’t give her
undivided attention. The baby took up most of her time and they were all worried about how Meg
would handle that. Luckily she enjoyed helping with the baby so it had been easy enough to take
care of Drew and simply involve the little girl in it. It took Ali a while to get Meg calmed down
when the keeper left, but after an afternoon at the beach with Deb, Drew, Sydney and Cash they
enjoyed a girls’ night back at the big old house. They did facials and painted fingernails and
toenails and even gave Deb a makeover. By the time Hannah and Dev arrived Sunday to pick her
up, Meg was still talking about how funny Deb looked after she had done her make-up for her. All
in all, Meg’s visit had been a big success, especially considering she had to share Ashlyn’s
precious time with the new baby.

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Ashlyn’s third Road Trip that year was with Hilary Knight and they were driving the newest, not
even on the market yet, sports coupe from Suburu. Nike was having an event in NYC Saturday
night and Ashlyn had convinced Hilary to drive with her to NYC. She would do the Road Trip
video and interview with the hockey star and Hilary could get some good footage for her GoPro
sponsorship. They would both benefit from that actually. Hilary had been repping GoPro longer
than Ashlyn, but the keeper’s videos were some of the most popular of any of GoPro’s athletes. It
took just over four hours to drive from Boston to NYC so it was a pretty easy Road Trip. Hilary
drove and Ashlyn filmed and asked her questions about how she got started playing hockey, who her role models were growing up, and what it felt like to win the gold medal at the Olympics last year. They were such good friends in real life that the interview was actually awkward. Ashlyn already knew most of the answers and Hilary knew she did so her answers were shorter and less expansive than they normally might have been. The trade-off for anybody disappointed by that was that you got to see two world class athletes being themselves as they drove to NYC. The GoPro footage was even better because it had all kinds of behind the scenes stuff that was very funny and Hilary filmed all the time. She filmed when getting ready for the event and during the event and there were some wonderful takes with other athletes and bigwigs before the night was over.

The first Road Trip had been back at the end of February. Ashlyn had chosen Julian Edelman to kick off her new driving and interviewing gig and they had driven Subaru’s biggest SUV up to Sugarloaf in Maine to go snowboarding. This was also about a four-hour drive and it was also a lot of fun to shoot. Julian admitted that it had taken him a while to get used to the snow, being from California and all. And one of the things that helped him learn to love it was snowboarding. Ashlyn shot her own GoPro footage of them snowboarding too so it was a very lucrative weekend for the blonde.

The second Road Trip was the longest and hardest. Ashlyn flew to Cincinnati, Ohio and picked up Rose Lavelle and drove her back to Boston a week before Breakers’ training camp started. It was a thirteen hour drive and they broke it up into two days, leaving Rose’s parents’ house Saturday morning and arriving at her host family’s suburban Boston home on Sunday afternoon. For this Road Trip they drove a tricked out Subaru Outback and hit some really bad winter weather as they drove through Pennsylvania. Rose was a terrible driver, and freely admitted it, so they had to change things up and have Rose hold the camera herself during the interview portions of the drive. The good news was that she was one of the quirkiest and most lovable people Ashlyn had ever known. The keeper always had fun with Sweet Baby Rose. And she was still the same goofy, lovable dork that she had always been, even though she was a big star on the USWNT and getting ready to play in her first World Cup that summer. Both women loved to sing and dance so they did lots of that as they drove. And they spent almost three full hours talking about dogs. They got into an in-depth conversation about several different Hitchcock movies, Rose had borrowed Ali’s collection and watched every single one after the team had watched the first one together during championship week two years ago. Ashlyn had to call Ali to get her to settle a debate about where exactly Alfred Hitchcock had made his cameo appearance in one of the films because their reception was bad and they couldn’t get the answer on either of their phones.

The fourth and final Road Trip was planned for the end of October, hopefully after The Breakers had won back to back championships. Ashlyn had somehow talked Whitney into driving with her down to North Carolina for the defender’s wedding. It would be a twelve-hour trip and they would split it into two days, arriving the day before the rehearsal dinner. Ashlyn was Whitney’s matron of honor so they would have all sorts of wedding-week jittery things to talk about along with all the funny stories about Ashlyn being a new mom. They were both looking forward to it. These Road Trips and the NWSL interviews that Ashlyn had been doing all season on every away game were really raising her value in the marketing and advertising world. It wasn’t always easy work either. Ashlyn would much rather have stayed home with her wife and new baby that year, but she was not going to let her sponsors down. Unless Ali or Drew were deathly ill she would always honor her commitments. She could still hear Gram’s voice telling her how hard it was to make your word worth something and how easy it was to make it worthless. Ashlyn would never bring shame to the Harris or the Holatka or the Krieger names if there was any way she could help it.
No sooner had Ashlyn returned home late Sunday afternoon after her NYC event for Nike, than she and Whitney packed up and left for the first of two away games in the Breakers’ road trip. They left Tuesday morning and flew to Seattle for their Wednesday night game. Then they were staying in the Pacific Northwest for their game in Portland Saturday afternoon. It was the Game of the Week on Lifetime and it was big news. Any time the Breakers and the Thorns played over the past couple of seasons it was a big game for both teams. They had faced each other in the last two championships and their rivalry was intense. It was well-respected on both sides, but intense. It was like the Celtics-Lakers rivalry in the NBA back in the 80s. If one of the teams faced a different team in the championship game one year, it didn’t feel the same. It felt like less of a victory if they hadn’t beaten their rivals. And the way the table was shaping up this season, Boston and Portland were going to be the top two teams again. If they could win their playoff games they would most likely be facing each other for another championship duel. Championship Week was in Portland this season too, so the Thorns had extra motivation to win it all on their home pitch. Some fans complained that it was an unfair advantage for one of the two championship teams to be playing a true home game. But the Championship Weeks had been awarded a couple of years in advance so it was up to the Thorns to get to play in that game in their home stadium. It wasn’t given to them or guaranteed. That was the same dream the Breakers had for next season when Boston would be hosting Championship Week. Unfortunately for the Breakers, they didn’t win either of their two games on that road trip in August. They played to a draw in Seattle and they lost in Portland. There were seven games left in the season for Boston to catch Portland, overtake them and hold onto the top spot in the table to win the Supporters Shield. That was goal number one. Win the Shield. Then win a playoff game. Then win the championship game.

All of a sudden it was August 19th and there were two weeks left to their summer. Where had the time gone? It felt like Drew had just joined their family a week ago and now, in two weeks, Deb would be going home and Ali would be going back to work part-time. Where the fuck were the brakes and how did you get them to start working?! As Drew approached his three-month birthday he was still perfecting his reaching and grabbing and tummy time. He was just beginning to be able to hold his own head up and sit up for short periods of time if they propped him up with pillows. He was sleeping for four hours during the night and feeding seven or eight times a day as his stomach grew bigger and was able to hold more milk. It was still a daunting schedule filled with about five shorter naps throughout the day. Those forty-five to seventy-five minute naps were the only time during the day that Ali could get anything done. But she was starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Drew was spending more time awake and active during the day and it was only going to keep trending that way.

And if she had a moment where the exhaustion and stress of living in a less controlled environment than she was used to started to get to her, all she had to do was look at her sweet baby boy and everything fell into better perspective. What did it matter if she hadn’t showered in two days, or was it three? – she honestly couldn’t remember, as long as she was giving him what he needed that was all that mattered. It was a challenge for the normally very organized and efficient woman to try and function in a new world full of disarray, clutter, endless loads of tiny laundry and random or no schedules to follow. And to do it while sleep deprived was even more difficult. But they were doing it. And Drew was growing and changing right before their very eyes. A smile or a giggle from him made everything else in the world pale in comparison. The feeling of partnership and family in the house that summer was powerful too. Of course the brunette felt like her true life partner was doing her share and participating as fully as possible. Ashlyn had been terrific all summer long and her optimism and enthusiasm and good nature went a long way towards keeping Ali sane and happy at home. She didn’t think she could appreciate her keeper’s loving, laid-back
personality more than she did in those trying months. There was nobody else in the world that she would choose to go through this with. Nobody could be as loving and helpful and kind and cheerful and even-tempered as her beautiful wife. Ashlyn never complained about anything, except having to leave Ali and Drew. The brunette knew that she would be a good wife and a good mother and a good partner in raising their family. But she had no idea she would be so extra good at all of it.

Aside from the blonde, the big old house that summer was full of important people in their lives who showed time after time how willing to help they were. If they were voting for an MVP for the summer Deb would be the leading candidate, but Whitney would give her a run for her money. What they did was different, of course, but equally important to the well-being of everyone in the house. Deb was the quintessential, hands-on grandma who always seemed thrilled to do anything that needed being done. She did the dishes and cleaned up the kitchen after their meals. And she did all of the cooking too. Her favorite things to help with were, of course, feeding and bathing and playing with her new grandson. Deb was there whenever Ali needed her, sometimes before she even knew she needed her. The mother gave the daughter advice on recovering from childbirth, including some of the tricks Dr. Comello had told them about before they left the hospital. And somehow Deb was constantly around but never in the way. Her smile very rarely left her face and she was only truly angry a couple of times. Her anger always revolved around her stubborn daughter trying to do too much when she should have been resting and recovering.

Deb was the laundry queen, no competition. When she had gone to the soccer camp on the North Shore, Sydney joked that she didn’t recognize Deb without a laundry basket attached to her hip. At first she had stuck pretty exclusively to laundry for the baby – onesies and other baby clothes and then the million pounds of burp cloths and changing table covers and crib sheets and bassinette liners and blankets and towels and wash cloths that they used to take care of baby Drew. Gradually that morphed into sheets and towels for the whole house, even though both Ali and Ashlyn begged her not to do anything extra. Ashlyn ended up doing most of the laundry for she and her wife and she knew what she was doing. She loved clothes and paid enough attention to them to know when something probably shouldn’t get thrown into the drier. She was also used to fighting her way through Ali’s clothes that she hung to air dry in the bathroom so she recognized a lot of what the brunette didn’t want to get ruined in the drier.

The problem was that they were both so tired that they did silly or forgetful things. They put dirty dishes into the clean dishwasher that just hadn’t been emptied yet. Deb found Ali’s toothbrush in the nursery at least twice a week. Poor thing must have felt like brushing her teeth during one of her middle of the night feedings and just gotten confused. Ashlyn just went out and bought twenty toothbrushes so there would always be one if her wife needed a new one. The keeper occasionally forgot to finish the laundry. She would leave the wet clothes in the washing machine overnight and have to wash them again in the morning. Or, more often, she forgot to take the clean clothes out of the drier. When she did this, Deb would almost always fold the clothes and bring them upstairs and put them in neat piles on their bed. The first time she folded a whole bunch of Ashlyn’s underwear she had doubled over in laughter. The girl liked her boxers, and boxer briefs and boyshorts and she liked them colorful and she kept them fun and a little raunchy sometimes. Most of them were just fun but some were naughtier. Ashlyn died of embarrassment the first time she saw the pile of clean, folded underwear on her bed.

“Please tell me you did our laundry and not your mom” her voice was low and her face was serious as she looked at Ali who was propped up in bed, nursing the baby.

Ashlyn and Whitney had just returned home from training that afternoon and Ali and the baby had just woken up from naps. Deb had been doing chores for the past couple of hours.

“Sorry babe” the brunette replied with a yawn. “It wasn’t me.” She smiled at Drew and then turned
her attention to her keeper. “Why? Did she put your lucky shirt in the drier or something?”

The blonde had the very first UNC t-shirt that she had ever bought. It was twelve years old and so well-worn and loved that Ashlyn had to wash it in the gentle cycle with other delicates and hang it to dry so it didn’t fall apart. She wore it for really big UNC games, like if they were playing in the championship game.

“No” Ashlyn answered quietly as she split up the piles of clean clothes and started putting them away.

“Ash, what’s the matter?”

Ali was getting concerned and was afraid her mother must have ruined something important to the keeper. Ashlyn turned back to the clothes at the foot of the bed and lifted her eyes to meet her wife’s.

“Umm, she folded our clothes.”

“Yes, I see that honey.” The brunette’s brow was knotted in confusion and a little worry. “What’s going on with you?”

“She folded...my underwear” she blushed and looked at her wife with an almost pained expression on her face.

Ali laughed out loud and startled the baby. She thought about some of her wife’s underwear as she soothed Drew and tried to stop giggling. There was the set of six boxer briefs that had risqué sayings on the front of them, right over the crotch. One said ‘Lick it Like You Mean It’, another read ‘Don’t be a Pussy, Eat One’. One read ‘All You Can Eat’ and another said ‘Be My Guest’. The last two in the set said ‘If You Lick it, It Will Come’ and ‘It’s Not Gonna Lick Itself’. Those were probably the dirtiest, but she had a ton of others that walked the line. Then she had a bunch that were just funny, like the Harry Potter themed boxer briefs that said ‘I solemnly swear that I am up to no good’ on the front and ‘Mischief managed’ on the back. There were three different pairs of boyshorts in bright, vibrant colors, with a cat’s head directly over the crotch. There were several pairs with sharks on them, and one of them said ‘Bite Me’ across the back. There was a pair that said ‘Stop Staring and Get Busy’. Some of Ali’s favorites were the boxer briefs that said ‘Wifey’ on the back and another pair that said ‘Congratulations, You Made It This Far’ across the backside. That pair always made her laugh, no matter how hot and bothered she was. And it was almost embarrassing how many pairs of underwear Ashlyn had that said some version of ‘Like a Boss’ or ‘Bad Ass’ or ‘Smart Ass’ or ‘All Star’.

As Ali settled the baby, she watched the blonde’s blush deepen. She didn’t think it was a big deal, but then put herself in her wife’s position and imagined Tammye folding her underwear for her.

“I’m sorry babe” she tried not to giggle. “She’s just being helpful. I wouldn’t worry about it. She probably didn’t even bother to read them. If she was watching one of her shows she probably didn’t even notice.”

“Ugh” Ashlyn sighed heavily and threw her head back dramatically. “I’m so embarrassed. I may never be able to face your mother again.”

“Oh please” Ali rolled her eyes and chuckled. “It’s not like she walked in on us having sex and stayed for a visit while you had your hand inside me and your mouth on my nipple or anything.”

It was Ashlyn’s turn to laugh out loud.
“Yeah” she giggled and grinned at her wife. “You’re right. You’ve still got me beat. Poor Gram. God that was funny.”

“Poor Gram?!” Ali challenged with a laugh. “She loved it.”

They both started laughing again, big, loud, belly laughs that came with tears and snorts.

“Everything ok up there” Deb’s voice came up the backstairs from the kitchen.

“Yep, we’re good mom” Ali answered as she wiped the best kind of tears from her face.

They heard Deb climbing the stairs and Ashlyn made sure all of her underwear was put away before starting to put Ali’s t-shirts and pajamas in the dresser. She was still chuckling and wiping tears of laughter off of her face too. Deb knocked on the open door frame and stuck her head inside the door.

“Everybody decent?” she asked with a grin.

“Come in mom, yes” the brunette giggled as she burped Drew and then settled him in to nurse from her other breast.

“I was going to put some hamburgers on the grill for dinner, does that sound ok?” Deb asked innocently.

“Mmmmm, that sounds yummy” Ali replied. “We have salad and is that corn still good?”

“I just brought it home yesterday. It’s perfect. I’ll come down and shuck it and start the grill Deb.”

“Oh I can do it, I just wanted to make sure it sounded ok” Deb said as she started down the stairs.

“No, I’m coming down right now. I got it Deb.”

Ashlyn leaned across the bed to give her wife a kiss and they both cracked up laughing again when they heard Deb’s response from the bottom of the stairs.

“Ok, whatever you say... ‘All-Star’.”

Whitney’s help and support was just as ever-present as Deb’s, but, as usual with the quiet defender, not always as easy to recognize. She was the de facto supply person. Whatever was needed at the house, she went and got. Ashlyn started leaving her credit card in the top drawer of the desk in the mudroom so Whitney could just take it and use it for her grocery store, hardware store, big box Costco store, pet supply store and pharmacy trips. Whatever supply was needed got put on ‘the list’ which was stuck with a magnet to the side of the fridge, right near the coffee maker. Anybody could add something to the list. The defender went grocery shopping twice a week and filled in with the other stores as necessary. It was a thankless task but she was more than happy to do it. She also did a hundred thoughtful, little things over the course of that summer. She would make sure the vehicles had gas in them – which turned out to be something else the sleepy new moms often forgot to do. Whitney took over Ali’s job of picking up after Ashlyn around the house. She had done it for all the years they had roomed together so it wasn’t new. She also took over a lot of Ashlyn’s chores around the house, or at least helped her with them, like taking the trash and recycling out to the garage and wheeling the big barrels down to the curb every Friday morning. And Whitney was in charge of the dogs. Ashlyn had talked with her before she started flying back and forth to Connecticut in June and asked her if she would take care of the dogs for them for the month. They had just never looked back from there. Everybody helped with the dogs because they all loved dogs and enjoyed spending time with them. But they would ask Whitney before feeding
them because they knew the defender had probably already done it. That also meant picking up the poop in the backyard every day. Now that the dogs spent a good portion of the day in the fenced in yard, there wasn’t always a person and a poop bag available every time one of them did their business. Ashlyn would go out and pick up after them before playing with them in the afternoon or evening. Poor Whitney got stuck doing that disgusting chore until it dawned on the keeper. As soon as Ashlyn realized, she put a stop to it and made that chore a priority for herself every day after training. Nobody should have to deal with that mess.

And Aunt Whit spent her share of time with the newborn as well. Just as Deb hadn’t wanted to steal any of Tammye’s time with the baby, Whitney tried to do the other things that needed doing so Deb could spend time with little Drew that summer. But she was good with the baby and loved to read to him, whether he was awake or not. Whitney would lie on the couch in the family room with Drew on her stomach and chest. She would rest the book on his cute little bum and read to him in the most soothing voice. On the best days he, and sometimes she too, would fall asleep like that. On the worst days he would throw up on her and sometimes the book, depending on their positioning. The new moms thanked their two primary helpers earnestly and often, sometimes with hugs and happy tears. The whole ‘it takes a village’ idea was alive and well in the big old house. That was for sure.

Having Deb there with them for three months had been more helpful than they could have imagined. Both Ali and Ashlyn were nervous about her going home to Miami in a week and a half. The good news was that Kyle was coming to stay for two weeks in September and Ali was really looking forward to that. She and her brother had drifted a little farther apart over the summer and neither of them was very happy about it. Ali was just too busy and exhausted to talk on the phone when he was available to talk on the phone. Once he realized the type of schedule his sister was operating on he made sure to call her during the day more. And he made very sure to take her calls when she found time to make them. He was busy with Nathan and his life in NYC and his star was on the rise as well. He was more popular than ever on Instagram. He was doing Audi print ads and he had been invited to work on a multi-platform art project that would be unveiled at the Contemporary Art Museum sometime next year once all the parts and pieces were completed. Kyle and Nathan were very serious and very happy together. The only problem was that they weren’t together very often. Nathan travelled to NYC as often as he could, sometimes able to bundle his shifts at the pharmacy so that he had three or four days off at a time. They were frustrated by the distance between them but both too afraid to suggest a more permanent change.

Ryan’s final lacrosse season in Western New York came to an end in the middle of August and he would be coming to live with Whitney in the big old house for September and October. He took some time at the end of August to get everything he owned packed up and shipped back to his parents’ house on Long Island, New York. He wouldn’t move too much stuff up to Boston until he and Whitney got situated after the wedding and honeymoon at the end of October. His first season as assistant coach for the Boston Cannons would start in early April next year. Training camp would start in March, much like Whitney’s schedule, and they wanted to have their own apartment all set up and moved into by the end of February at the latest. There was a chance they could sublet a house in Cambridge from a University professor who was going on sabbatical for two years. It wasn’t in one of the nicer areas of Cambridge, but it was still Cambridge and they were trying not to get their hopes up too much. Molly and her endless connections and contacts had brought this opportunity their way and they were extremely grateful. They expected to get the final answer towards the end of the year.

And there always seemed to be more baby news. Beth’s pregnancy was going along smoothly. She was due in January and baby Johnny’s second birthday had just been at the end of July. Beth’s flower shop was doing well and Mike Harris was still working there and staying mostly out of trouble. They were all still worried about him but, as was usually the case, time had started to help
him heal from the loss of his mother. He spent more time with Johnny than any of the other grandparents and he had fallen in love with the boy. Everybody in the Harris clan was happily looking forward to the newest addition. Niki and Molly had both confided in Ashlyn and Ali, respectively, when they had visited the big old house after Ashlyn’s soccer camp earlier that month. There hadn’t been too much discussion about it, what with all the intern drama that took over that afternoon. But Molly was pregnant with their second child and was due in April next year. Baby Noah would turn four this December and they didn’t want there to be too big of an age gap between them. They were ready and excited to add to their little family.

Ali and Ashlyn’s second wedding anniversary was Sunday August 25th. The Breakers had just played to a draw the afternoon before against Orlando at home. And Ashlyn’s fourth out of eight soccer camps was being held down on the South Shore on Sunday, her recovery day. She enlisted Whitney’s help again as well as Kristie Mewis’, whose parents still lived down on the South Shore. It was a smaller camp which turned out to be a very good thing because it would be easier for Marcy to keep it running on schedule which meant it would be easier for the keeper to get back up to Gloucester so she could take her beautiful wife out to dinner to celebrate their anniversary.

“You look beautiful tonight” Ashlyn smiled at her wife across the romantic table for two.

“That’s for you” she replied shyly. “So do you.”

“Can you believe it was two years ago already?”

“Kind of” Ali started. “But then sometimes it feels like just two days ago too.”

“I like what they’ve done with this room” Ashlyn commented as she looked around the freshly redecorated room where they had held the rehearsal dinner the night before their wedding. “Still can’t beat that view though. That’s the real beauty in the room” she nodded towards the wall of glass that overlooked the back harbor in Rockport.

“No, you are” Ali smiled again and reached her hand out to hold her wife’s.

“Wow, and you’re always accusing me of being cheezy” Ashlyn grinned.

“Hey, it’s not cheezy if it’s true” she countered and squeezed Ashlyn’s hand. “And you’re easily the most beautiful thing in this room.”

The keeper blushed and then recovered, picking up her wine glass and holding it up for a toast.

“Here’s to us baby. Happy Anniversary to my favorite person in the whole world.”

They clinked their glasses and sipped their wine and grinned at each other like the fools in love that they were. Ashlyn had struggled with what to do for their anniversary that year. She wanted to take Ali out to a big fancy dinner and treat her like the princess that she was. But she knew the brunette wasn’t going to fit into any of her fancy dresses yet and she didn’t want her to feel bad about it. On the other hand she thought Ali might enjoy going out and buying a new dress for the special occasion. It was a real stumper and she ended up consulting Sydney after giving it a lot of thought on her own.

“If you just had a baby three months ago would you want to go out and buy a new fancy dress and go out for a fancy dinner for your anniversary or would you rather keep it a little more casual and go for a nice dinner locally and then maybe for a sunset cruise around the harbor?” she asked into the phone two weeks before her anniversary. “You know, just hypothetically.”

Sydney laughed at the thoughtful blonde. “Yeah, just hypothetically, I’d rather keep it casual and
local. At three months I was exhausted and still sore and things were still occasionally leaking” she shared, honestly. “But buy me something nice and beautiful and sparkly.”

“I already did” Ashlyn answered confidently but then paused and got a little less confident. “I just don’t want her to feel like I don’t want to take her out and show her off to everybody...because I do. I don’t think she’s ever looked more beautiful.”

“Just keep reminding her Ash. You’ve always been great about that and it makes a big difference.” The coach’s voice softened. “Just keep doing what you’re doing and she’ll love your anniversary date.”

As they walked together down to the boat for the harbor cruise an hour later, the sun was just beginning to start its’ final descent. They waited in line and Ashlyn held her wife from behind, wrapping her long arms loosely around her waist as Ali leaned back into her chest. The brunette wore a simple sundress, pale blue with a small orange and pink flowered pattern, and a white cardigan sweater tied around her waist. Her flat, white sandals matched her tiny white purse that was strapped diagonally across her body. Ali had even done her nails, white to match, for the special evening. Ashlyn felt bad when she thought about how long it had been since she had painted her wife’s nails for her. She took a little bit of solace in the fact that Ali had loved the diamond and emerald necklace she had given her for their anniversary before they had left the house. It came to rest just below her collar bone and the small gems dotted a white gold chain, alternating deep green and sparkling white.

Ali had stuck with the more traditional anniversary gift theme and used cotton for their second anniversary. There was a company she found online that made custom designs on cotton canvas that you could hang up or even frame. She had chosen to go with no frame and used a cotton canvas wrapped around a board that would stick off the wall by about an inch and a half. The brunette designed a map of the United States on the 24” x 16” cotton canvas, with the surrounding ocean a deep blue. The map was outlined in black and the states were all different colors of greys and creams and browns and purples. Some of the states were lighter colors and others were darker but they were all labelled in strong white letters so you could easily read them. There were dotted white lines from Massachusetts to every state Ashlyn had visited in the two years since they were married and they met under a big, red heart over Boston. At the top of the canvas, in bigger, white, script letters it read:
‘Ashlyn & Ali
8/25/17 – Forever’

And in the bottom right corner of the canvas, just off the coast of the Carolinas, there was a poem by Tyler Kent White:
‘she was a ballet of places
she had never been
maps strung out
across her skin

in meters and miles
she measured the minutes
it would take to get from point A
to points she knew she had to be
points she could not wait to see

and all along i was just hoping
they all led her back to me.’
The keeper had cried when she saw the map and read the poem. She hugged her wife and kissed her through her tears. She dropped to her knees, lifted Ali’s sundress up and kissed her wave tattoo near her left hip, holding the brunette in a tight embrace and smiling into the emotional kiss. Ali gasped in surprise at the sudden and intimate contact. She smiled and held the back of Ashlyn’s head for several minutes, happy they had exchanged gifts in the privacy of their bedroom. But if the blonde didn’t get her lips away from that tattoo in the next thirty seconds they were going to miss their dinner reservation. After they were both standing again, they kissed and exchanged heartfelt ‘I love yous’. They made it to dinner with only seconds to spare.

It was a warm and humid night, not the kind of humid they dealt with down in Florida, but humid nonetheless, and their arms stuck together slightly as they stood there. Ali was hot but she didn’t want to leave her wife’s arms just yet. They didn’t say anything as they stood there. They just took in the sights and smells and sounds of the dock and the other people in line with them. The seagulls were squawking above them and a warm breeze blew lightly across their content faces as the line finally started to move.

“Thank you so much, we really appreciate it” Ashlyn said to the other couple who had just taken their picture for them.

They had traded off photographer duties so each couple had a few pictures of themselves on the rail of the boat with the glorious multi-colored sunset behind them. The boat slowed way down so everybody had a chance to get some pictures without their hair being blown all around their faces. Customer Service – people were finally starting to figure it out. Once the boat turned around and started the trip back around the other side of the harbor, after enjoying the last fiery moments before the sun slipped below the horizon, it started to get a little chillier with the cooler breeze off of the ocean. Ali slipped her sweater on and Ashlyn buttoned up her loose, purple dress shirt and rolled the sleeves down to cover her forearms. They sat together on one of the padded benches near the bow of the boat, Ashlyn’s arm around the brunette’s shoulders, and watched the darkening outline of the harbor move past them.

“Thank you for such a wonderful night Ashlyn.”

“This was nice, right?” the keeper asked, sounding a little surprised.

“It was very nice. Why? Did you think it wasn’t going to be?” Ali turned her head to look at the side of her keeper’s face.

“No, I mean, yes I knew it would be nice” she chuckled and turned to look into her favorite whiskey-colored eyes. “I just wasn’t sure if this would be ok or if you’d rather get dressed up and go to a fancy dinner in the city” she confessed. “That’s all.”

“This was absolutely perfect honey. Really” she kissed Ashlyn’s lips softly. “I always love getting dressed up with you” she smiled shyly. “But I can’t think of anyplace else I’d rather be right now than here. Dinner reminded me of our actual wedding and that was amazing. And this cruise makes me think of the sunset sail we took for your birthday down in Chatham last year. That whole day, remember? It was unbelievable.”

“That’s exactly what made me book this harbor cruise” Ashlyn grinned again and her dimple appeared. “Summers, and the ocean, and you in my arms...nothing is ever going to be better than that. Not for me anyway.”

“Me either babe” Ali agreed and nuzzled into her keeper’s neck. “Me either.”

They both thought about what they had done after the sunset sail down in Chatham the year before.
They thought about the couples massage they had enjoyed before the sail and the long, sexy night after it. They thought about it for the rest of the cruise and as they held hands walking through the streets of Rockport on the way to Ashlyn’s car. Ali held her wife’s forearm over the console, she needed her hand for shifting the manual transmission, and caressed it during the short drive home. Ashlyn leaned over for a kiss at every stop sign or red light and by the time they pulled into the driveway their skin was on fire from the inside out. They both knew there wasn’t anything to be done about it for at least another hour or so. It was just past 8:30pm and there was nursing or pumping to be done before they could even think about making a graceful exit for the night. They sat close together on the couch and Ali leaned into the blonde, with Ashlyn’s arm around her shoulders, as she nursed their son. She often felt over-touched those days, and it came from having a baby pulling on her for most of the day, day after day. Ashlyn had adjusted accordingly and gave her quick kisses and light squeezes instead of big, engulfing hugs during that time. But every once in a while the brunette would revert to her old ways and want to be as close to her keeper as humanly possible. That Sunday night was one of those times. She didn’t want an inch of space between she and her wife.

“Hold me close” she had whispered as Ashlyn handed her the baby and sat down next to her on the couch.

They spent almost an hour there, feeding and admiring the freshly bathed baby Drew and talking about the evening with Deb and Whitney. The dogs were sprawled out on the floor and there was a Red Sox game on the television with the sound turned low. There was a bouquet of flowers on the coffee table that had been delivered that afternoon with a card that read: ‘Happy Anniversary Mamas, Love baby Drew’

Nobody had fessed up to the sweet and thoughtful gesture and honestly, it could have been any of their friends or family. They both thought it had been Deb but they really couldn’t rule out anybody. When Drew was finished nursing Ali burped him and snuggled with him for several minutes before passing him to Ashlyn. She leaned over as they made the transfer and whispered in the blonde’s ear before standing and heading up to bed.

“Make sure you wake me up.”

And she did indeed wake her up. Ashlyn felt bad about doing it, as she always did, but they had talked about it a couple of times before and Ali had finally convinced her. When the keeper got into bed that night and moved towards her sleeping wife she was excited to find her completely naked beneath the covers. Not even one of her nursing bras came between them as Ashlyn gently crawled on top of her, carefully supporting her own weight on her knees and elbows. Ali mumbled and moaned in her sleep, tossing her head to the side and wriggling her nose. Ashlyn’s heart swelled to an even fuller capacity than it had been all night long as she watched her beautiful wife sleeping a few inches from her face. She started placing soft, slow kisses to Ali’s cheeks and chin and forehead. She kissed up the jawline she could get to and spent a minute licking and kissing the soft skin behind the brunette’s ear. Ali moanedagain and turned her head back, cutting off the access to that side. As Ashlyn smiled to herself and started to move her mouth over to the other side of the sleeping face she saw big brown eyes fluttering open and felt Ali’s arms wrap around her bare back. She brought her face up and kissed her wife’s lips gently. When she opened her eyes after the kiss Ali was gazing back at her.

“Hi” she said softly.

“Hi baby. I’m waking you up, but it’s ok if you...”

“Did you lock the doors?” Ali asked as she lazily moved her hands down to find the soft skin of
Ashlyn’s naked ass.

“I did” the keeper couldn’t help but smirk as she felt her wife pulling her closer, wanting to feel her skin all over her own.

“Happy Anniversary honey, I love you” the brunette said and then brought their lips together in a deep kiss.

“God I love you Ali.”
Oh What a Night

Deb left on Wednesday that week and everything changed for the young couple. There was no super Grandma crutch to lean on anymore and they noticed right away. Aside from the mounting pile of laundry and dishes that appeared almost immediately, the logistics of their life got harder without her too. Whitney and Ashlyn flew to Kansas City Friday afternoon for their game Saturday afternoon. That meant Ali would be home, alone, with the baby and the dogs for two nights until they returned early Sunday afternoon. Kyle wasn’t coming until the following week and Sydney was busy getting herself ready for her own back to school work.

“I’ll be fine” Ali said confidently as she helped her wife get packed up Friday morning. “I won’t try to do everything, I promise. I’ll just feed us all and worry about basic bodily functions. That’s it.”

“Please don’t forget to eat baby. There’s stuff thawed and ready to go in the fridge for you. All you have to do is heat things up in the microwave, ok?” Ashlyn stopped packing and stepped closer to hug the brunette. “I’ll feed you better when we get back. I promise.”

“I’m really not worried Ash” she pecked her keeper’s lips and smiled at her. “I don’t want you worrying about us. You concentrate on getting a good night’s sleep and kicking ass tomorrow afternoon. I want those three points babe.”

They drove away from the big old house at 11am and the keeper must have called her wife four times before the plane even took off at 2pm. Whitney finally took her phone from her and told her she could have it back when she calmed down.

“She had a baby” she told her best friend with a pointed look. “They didn’t remove her brain.”

The day went pretty well. Ali settled into the living room for the long haul, figuring it was the easiest place to take care of the baby and still give the dogs some attention too. She flipped through the channels on the tv and stopped on ‘A League of Their Own’. It was one of about six movies that she was physically unable to turn the channel away from if she ever stumbled across it. She took that as a good sign and gave Drew a big sloppy kiss on his big fat cheek.

“Who’s ready for some tummy time?” she cooed at her baby boy as she laid him flat on the floor on one of the brightly patterned blankets. It was like a quilt with different textured squares. Some of them were corduroy while others were sleek satin. A few were filled with a crinkly paper that Drew loved to grab at if he could manage it. He had hated tummy time at first, but he was up to almost thirty minutes a day now. They broke it up for him into three different sessions, ten minutes each. “Here we go sweet boy” she got on her stomach in front of him so they would be face to face if he lifted his head up enough. “Where’s mama? Can you see me baby?” The brunette reached out and tapped the backs of his little hands as he grunted and gurgled and tried to lift his head up enough to see her. “There’s a good boy, you can do it.”

By 8:30pm that night she had done the cycle of nap, eat and play four times since tummy time. Ali had done the bedtime routine of bathing her boy, reading to him in the glider in the nursery, nursing him one last time and then putting him to bed for the night. She set her alarm to wake up at midnight for the next feeding and then again at 4am for the one after that, just in case she forgot to set it after the midnight meal. Ali was tired as she went back downstairs to clean up the kitchen and she yawned loudly as she closed the dishwasher. She was pleased with herself for doing such a good job all alone that day, which sounded ridiculous when she thought it. But it was the first time she had been alone with the baby for any real length of time since he was born. And the end of
August was a whole other ballgame compared to the end of May or even June. She didn’t think she could have done it by herself back then. Buoyed by her self-awarded victory she decided to bake brownies as a reward. She turned on the oven to preheat and went to the side door of the family room, by the nook, to let the dogs in. They wagged their tails at her and she took a couple of minutes and petted them and loved them up. They were really good dogs and they were lucky dog owners and they knew it. Persey got bored and antsy without a good walk or a good outdoor play during the day, but Fred didn’t get bothered by inactivity until about the third day. She would have to take them for a walk tomorrow morning with Drew or Persey would drive her crazy all day long. Ali walked into the mudroom with both dogs at her heels and reached up to their treat shelf in one of the cabinets above the washer and drier. She gave them each one of the new treats Ashlyn had bought. They were supposed to be good for their teeth, just chewy enough to scrape them clean but not so hard that they would hurt their teeth or gums.

“Good doggies” she praised them after they each sat and gave her a paw for their reward. “I promise we’ll do something fun tomorrow, ok?”

Twenty minutes later she put the pan of brownies into the oven and set the timer for 25 minutes. She replied to a couple of texts from Ashlyn, and some from her mom, her brother and Sydney. They were all checking in on her and she loved it and hated it at the same time. Did they really think she couldn’t handle it? She talked herself out of that line of thought and reminded herself that they were just trying to be helpful. Her dad had called her while she was mixing up the brownies and offered to come over if she wanted company. She loved how he didn’t say ‘needed help’. She really was the luckiest woman in the world. They made plans to bring Drew for his first visit to their favorite and special ice cream spot up in Ipswich tomorrow after lunch. She had to be back home to watch Ashlyn’s game at 4pm though. After sending the texts she went to tidy up the living room and put Drew’s toys away. As she was finishing up she heard the sound every pet owner dreads. One of the dogs was gagging and about to throw up. She hurried into the mudroom just in time to see Fred lurch towards the mudroom door and throw up all over Persey who had been lying by the door enjoying the very last bite of her treat. Fuck.

Fred had a bad habit of wolfing down his treats, and his food, and they tried to watch him to make sure he wasn’t swallowing pieces of treats that were too big. And Ali hadn’t done that. She gave it to him, a new treat that he’d never had before no less, and then went into the kitchen to make the stupid brownies. He started to gag again and she sprang into action. Ali pulled Persey up by her collar and held her with one hand, not wanting her to go anywhere else because she was covered in dog puke. She flung the door open and sent Fred out to throw up again outdoors.

“Ok Persey girl, I know, that stinks” she spoke to the dog as she walked her outside to the hose and dog washing area to the left of the mudroom door. She hooked Persey to the one foot lead that was screwed into the post there and went to check on Fred who was throwing up in the driveway about three feet away. He was really heaving and he took a small half step forward every time he took a breath and gagged. Finally he threw up again and Ali could see a lump of something in the bile-y vomit. It was too dark to make out what it was but she hoped it was the cause of the puking.

“You ok big boy?” She patted him and pulled him back as he sniffed at his own mess. “You ate that too fast didn’t you? You big dope.” She took him by his collar and put him in the backyard through the gate by the kitchen. “I’ll be back.”

Poor Persey was patiently waiting for her impromptu late evening bath. Ali jogged into the mudroom and got the dog shampoo and a dog towel out of the cabinet and hurried back outside, shutting the mudroom door behind her so no more bugs would get in. She spent about fifteen
minutes giving Persey a bath, bringing her nose right down against her fur where the vomit had been to make sure she didn’t still stink.

“Poor baby. We’ll get you all cleaned up.”

She unhooked her from the lead and watched the brindle dog, soaking wet, walk a few feet away and shake the water out of her coat a couple of times. She wagged her whole body and turned around looking for the towel and the brunette. As Ali started to dry her off she heard the timer in the kitchen go off.

“Oh shit, the brownies” she said to Persey. “Alright, I’ll be back.”

She walked Persey to the gate and put her in the backyard with Fred and tried to go in the house through the kitchen door but it was locked. Of course it was locked. They always locked their doors, especially at night, but even in the daytime if it was one of the doors they didn’t use much. The front door and the kitchen door were usually always locked. The mudroom door and the side door by the nook on the other side of the house were usually unlocked until it got dark. And when Ali stayed at the big old house by herself she kept them locked all the time. She always had. She knew it was sort of silly, but there was something about being alone in that big house that made her want to lock the doors. She wasn’t afraid of the house or anything, but it was big and there were four different doors and she couldn’t see them all at the same time. The idea of thinking she was alone in the house and then not really being alone in the house freaked her out.

“Oh fuck” she groaned when she tried to go in the mudroom door, only to find that it was locked too. There was no way she had just locked herself out of the house with her baby inside and brownies cooking in the fucking oven. Was there? “No fucking way” she breathed out as she started to panic.

She willed herself to stay calm as she walked around the house. She tried the front door but knew it was locked. Damn. She walked around to the left side yard and went through the gate there by the bulkhead. She quickened her pace as her heart pounded. She tried the side door by the nook but it was locked too.

“Fuck!” she yelled and the dogs came running from the other side of the backyard.

They were pleased to see her and Fred, feeling better, brought her one of his toys to tug with. She pushed past them in full panic mode now. She said a silent prayer and tugged on the bulkhead door handle. It didn’t move. She tugged again, harder, because sometimes it stuck, especially in the hot and humid weather. But it wouldn’t budge. It was locked tight. Ashlyn would definitely have checked that before she left that morning. It was almost 10pm and the kitchen timer was still beeping away and she could not get into the house. She started to feel dizzy as her mind raced and her heart pounded. Her phone was on the kitchen counter.

“Think” she said out loud to herself. “Just fucking think.”

All of the windows were closed and locked because the air conditioning was on. They were all alarmed and tied into the alarm system for the house and she knew they were all closed and locked. She was just going to have to break a window, there was no other choice. It was dark because she hadn’t turned on the light over there on that side of the house because she hadn’t planned on being out there. She could turn on the garage light and that would help her see the window on the back of the kitchen, right at the bottom of the backstairs. That was the window she was going to break, somehow. It was reachable from the outside and there was room for her to land on the inside, near the trash and recycling. Plus it was discreetly located at the back of the house so it wouldn’t look so unsightly when she boarded it up after breaking it. She hurried through the dark yard over to the
garage and went in through the door, located on the left side. Thank god it wasn’t locked. Why didn’t they lock the garage anymore? They had locked it when Knight-Harris was operating out of it. She would have to talk to Ashlyn about that when she came home.

Ali reached for the light switch that would illuminate the driveway and the back right corner of the house. Now she had to find something to break the window with and she had to do it fast before the brownies caused a fire. Her eyes fell on her golf clubs and she pumped her fist, pleased with her discovery. She ran back across the yard with her sand wedge in her hand. As she gripped the club with both hands and wound up to swing it at the glass in the rear kitchen window, a thought popped into her tired, stressed out head. There was a spare key in the garage. There was a fucking spare key in the fucking garage!! If she could find the spare key she wouldn’t have to spend time boarding up the window after she got back inside the house. That was an appealing proposition. She quickly weighed the time it would take to find the key versus the time it would take for the brownies to start a fire. She ran back to the garage and started looking around for the key. Where the hell was it?! She stopped and took a couple of deep breaths. The work bench. She couldn’t remember where exactly but she started pulling all the little plastic drawers out of the storage cabinet one at a time. All she found were nails and screws and washers and nuts and bolts and no fucking key.

She threw her head back in frustration and groaned out loud. As she opened her eyes she saw the fishing tackle box on the back left corner of the work bench. It had been Grandpa John’s or he had bought it for Chris or something. Ali couldn’t remember and it didn’t matter. She opened it and started rifling through it, catching her thumb on one of the lures inside. “Ow. Goddammit!” she yelled and snatched her hand back, fish hook still stuck in her thumb. “For Christ fucking sake.”

She pulled the hook out, happy it hadn’t gone deep enough so she had to deal with the barb too. Definitely dodged a bullet there. She forced herself to calm down and look for the key with her eyes. She moved a couple of metal hook containers out of the way and then saw the familiar old tobacco tin inside the tackle box. That was where the key was, she remembered now. She carefully lifted it out of the mess she had made of the lures and pried it open so she could grab the most beautiful key she had ever seen. Ali was so relieved she thought she might cry as she ran back out the door at the side of the garage and towards the gate by the kitchen porch. She stepped in something slippery and almost wiped out but kept her balance and moved quickly through the gate. She latched it behind her because the last thing she wanted to do was chase Fred around the neighborhood that night.

“Oh thank fucking God” she muttered to herself as she opened the mudroom door and ran inside. The smoke was just starting to come out of the oven as she turned off the timer and hit the exhaust fan to clear out the smoke. She turned the oven off and hit the light to see if they were actually on fire or not. “Whew” she exhaled and smiled appreciatively at the ceiling. “Thank you God.”

The alarm for the house wasn’t set for the night yet so she could open the windows without setting it off. She opened all three kitchen windows and the kitchen door too, thankful the screen door was in place. She put a pot holder over her hand, opened the oven door, grabbed the burnt pan of brownies and walked it quickly over to the kitchen sink. She dropped the smoking mess in the sink and turned the water on, dousing it and sighing in relief. As she stood there for a second trying to get her heart rate to come back down to normal, she wondered what that awful smell was. At first she thought it was some smell from the burning hot brownie pan and the water in the sink. But then it slowly came to her what the stink was. ‘No fucking way’ she thought to herself as she looked down at her right foot. It was bare, as was her left foot, but her right foot had been the one she had slipped on as she ran through the dark backyard. To her horror, she lifted her foot up and saw the
dog shit on the bottom of it. She looked back at the kitchen floor and saw that she had trailed it all the way through it.

“You have GOT to be kidding me!” she yelled out loud.

Before she could even reach the paper towels on the counter to start to clean her foot off, the smoke detector above her head started beeping, loudly. Between the smoke from the oven and the smoke from the smoldering pan she had carried to the sink, enough of it had made its’ way up to the smoke detector and it did its’ job. She was momentarily paralyzed and didn’t know what to do first. Clean the dog shit off of her foot or stand on the kitchen chair and take the smoke detector down. The beeping was so loud she couldn’t even think. Ali grabbed the paper towels and ripped about six sheets off the roll. She folded them so they were six sheets thick and put that on the kitchen chair as she moved it underneath the screaming smoke detector. She stood on the chair and wrestled the thing off of its’ mount and then walked it out the kitchen screen door to let it air out on the porch. As she turned around to go back into the kitchen she saw the dogs watching her nervously from behind the fence. Persey hated the smoke detector and shook uncontrollably every time she heard it. The poor thing was still wet too from her bath.

“I’ll be right there Persey” Ali tried to soothe the dog. “It’s ok. You’re ok girl.”

She left the smoke detector on one of the rocking chairs and went to the outdoor dog bath and washed her feet off, using the two pieces of paper towel that had stuck to the dog shit on the bottom of her foot to get most of the worst of it off. All of a sudden she got very very tired. It hit her as if somebody had drugged her. She leaned against the post and finished her foot bath, thankful for the dog shampoo that she had left outside. A powerful urge to cry came over her and she tried to fight it off. Just when she thought she was going to give in to it she heard Drew crying through the baby monitor on the mudroom desk. The smoke detector must have woken him. It was only 10:30pm she saw as she went into the mudroom, carefully avoiding her previous shitty footsteps. He should have slept until at least midnight, sometimes longer. She jumped into the living room and ran up the front stairs, pausing outside the nursery door for a few seconds to catch her breath.

“Oh sweet boy, it’s ok” she held the baby close to her chest and shushed him softly as she kissed his head. “I’m sorry all that racket woke you up baby” she patted his back as he started to calm down a bit. She kept all of her movements slow and steady and did the same with her voice. She wanted him to, and he needed to, go back to sleep and it was important to keep things as sleep-like as possible. “Shhhh, Drew, it’s ok sweetheart.”

It took her almost thirty minutes to get him back to sleep and she cringed when she remembered the dogs were both still outside. But she couldn’t bring them inside until she cleaned up the dog shit all over the mudroom floor. She went downstairs and got to work on the dirty task and was thankful that she hadn’t walked on any rugs. That was another bullet dodged. She used the dog gates they had to limit the dogs to the mudroom and the living room before going back outside with a dry dog towel to finish drying poor Persey off. She made sure they were both clean and dry and checked their paws to make sure they hadn’t stepped in any dog shit in the yard and then let them into the house. Fred, who had started the whole ordeal, trotted into the living room and hopped up on the couch for a nap. Persey went right into her crate in the mudroom with her tail between her legs, obviously upset by everything that had gone on during the past two hours. Ali gave her a couple of pats but didn’t have time to comfort her any better than that just then. She moved the mop and bucket to the kitchen and started cleaning that floor. She jumped out of her skin and yelped in surprise when she heard a man’s voice outside the still open kitchen door.

“Hello” the deep voice said, it was a little sing-songy, trying to sound friendly. “I’m sorry” it said

“Oh my God” she exhaled with an exhausted chuckle. “Neil, you scared me to death.”

“Julie told me to come over and make sure everything was ok. She said it looked like you might need a hand” he said as he came into view on the other side of the screen door. He took in the sight of the messy kitchen, and the smoke detector on the rocking chair next to him and chuckled. Persey whined and wagged her tail from the gate between the mudroom and the kitchen when she heard his voice. “Hi Persey” he said to the dog and smiled. “Can I do anything?”

“No, thank you” Ali leaned on the mop and blew some of the hair out of her face. “I’m almost done. I uh, had a little trouble with some burned brownies, and some dog...things happened” she chuckled again. “But I’ve almost got the kitchen put back together. You’re sweet to come over.”

“Julie heard the smoke detector and then saw all the lights on in the garage and started to get nervous, you know, with the baby and everything” he explained a little awkwardly. “I don’t want you to think we’re keeping tabs on you or anything” he laughed nervously and rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet.

He was a tall man with a friendly face and a lanky, swimmer’s build. His wife was the opposite, short and stout with a round face that always seemed to have a smile on it. They were both in their early forties and they had three kids, aged 5, 8 and 12. He worked for the US Fish and Wildlife Service and was in charge of the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge in Rowley, MA just the next town northeast of Ipswich. Julie was the high school nurse, just about to go back to work full-time now that her youngest would be going to kindergarten next week. They were both really nice and Ashlyn and Ali liked them a lot. They had been to each other’s house for dinner about four or five times over the past three years. Their middle child had allergies so they couldn’t get a dog or a cat. The other kids loved Persey and Fred and would come over to play with them as often as their parents would allow. They would sometimes walk with whomever was taking the dogs for a walk around the neighborhood. It was all very adorable and both households enjoyed the friendships they were building.

“Well, you would have had a good show tonight if you were” Ali laughed softly. “If I wasn’t so tired I’d tell you all about it.”

“Oh, well don’t let me keep you then” he said in a hurry.

“No, I’m not trying to get rid of you” she sighed. “Honestly, I’d love it if you could put that stupid smoke detector back up for me before it starts chirping again” she looked up at him sheepishly. “Do you mind?”

She finished mopping the floor and then let the dogs come into the kitchen so they could greet the visitor once he was done with his easy task. She bundled up all of the mess and filled the trashcan with it, tossing the ruined brownie pan in with it.

“Man, I could sure go for a brownie right about now” he joked quietly.

“Ha ha, very funny” Ali grinned at him as she lifted the full trash bag out of the can and put a clean one in its’ place.

“Here, let me help you with that” he took the heavy bag from her hand. “I’ll put it in your trash can on my way home” he smiled warmly. “It’s on the way.”

They both chuckled and Ali was too tired to put up any resistance.
“Give me one sec and I’ll walk with you” she said as she went to the mudroom, made sure the door was unlocked, and then pulled the spare key out of the handle.

She made sure the kitchen door was also unlocked and then held the screen door open for Neil and the large trash bag.

“After you” she motioned with her hand.

“What happened to your thumb?” he inquired as he walked past her outstretched hand. “That looks bad.”

“Oh I forgot about that” she looked at her throbbing thumb with the cut that had gotten worse with the cleaning of feet and floors that she had done. “You should see the other fish hook” she chuckled. “It’ll be fine. I’ll hit it with some Neosporin when I come back in.”

He put the trash bag into the big can on the far side of the garage and then stood in the driveway and waited for her to put the spare key back and turn off the garage lights.

“I take it Ash and Whit are travelling?” he asked as Ali returned to the driveway.

“Yes, Kansas City game tomorrow, at least I think it’s still Friday night right now but I’m really not sure” she sighed and rubbed her face.

“It is, for another fifteen minutes. If you need anything, please don’t be shy. You guys would help us so don’t be afraid to let us help you” he smiled again as he started to walk backwards towards his own backyard. “Don’t forget to lock up. And take care of that thumb or I’ll send Julie over.”

“Thanks Neil. And tell her thank you too.”

When she finally closed and locked all the kitchen windows and both the kitchen and the mudroom doors the brunette wanted to cry again. Her alarm went off for Drew’s midnight feeding and she turned off the lights on the first floor and brought both dogs up with her to sleep in her bedroom with her that night. They didn’t have crates up there anymore but they each had their own dog bed and they hopped in and curled right up, seemingly tired out from the evening’s excitement too. Ali set her alarm for thirty minutes in case she fell asleep while she was feeding Drew and she cancelled the alarm for 4am. She would let him sleep and hopefully he would go for five hours after this feeding. The theory behind waking him up to feed him was that if he woke himself up crying because he was hungry, it was counterproductive to getting him to sleep through the night. It also made it more difficult to feed him if he was already upset. The other thing she would mess up would be his morning wake-up time. They were supposed to keep his wake-up time and bedtime the same, no matter what. Everything else on his schedule could be flexible, but not those two things. It was important to help teach him to sleep through the night, which was the ultimate goal. But she was willing to take the risk that night. They were close to needing only one middle of the night feeding but he wasn’t quite there yet. Maybe, just maybe, tonight was the night. As she crawled into her bed at 12:45am she certainly hoped so. She was asleep before her head even hit the pillow.

By the grace of God, Drew slept until just after 6am. The brunette was thankful for the 5-1/2 hours of sleep she got but was still dead-tired. She missed her early bedtime the night before and lost about three hours of sleep that she knew would be hard to make up that day. But, as was always the case, as soon as she had her baby in her arms and he had latched on to her nipple and stopped fussing, the sheer joy she felt when she looked at her boy lifted her weary spirits and filled her heart. By the time she had done two cycles of feed, play, nap and put Drew down for his 10:30 nap, she zonked out for her own power nap on the couch with the dogs. A soft knocking on the
mudroom door went unheard by the brunette, but the dogs barking in response woke her up with a start.

“Hi Princess” Ken grinned at his daughter when she opened the door.

“Oh shit, what time is it?” her voice was sleepy and slightly stressed.

“It’s almost 12pm” he chuckled and moved past her without waiting to be invited inside. “We brought lunch and thought we’d come and watch the game here with you” he said over his shoulder as he carried a bag of take-out food into the kitchen.

“If that’s ok” Vicki paused at the mudroom door and looked at the tired brunette in front of her, rubbing her face with both hands.


Ken and Vicki got one look at the smoke covered walls and ceiling of the kitchen and knew they had done the right thing by coming over uninvited and unannounced. They sat at the nook table, ate lunch and talked. Ali finally filled them in on her evening of fun, sparing no details because she was too tired to intelligently edit anything out. Ken laughed out loud a couple of times but his daughter wasn’t quite able to see the humor in the story yet. She knew she would eventually tell the story with gusto and laugh along with everybody who heard it. But not that day. Not yet. Vicki pulled her step-daughter’s hand closer and inspected the cut on her thumb that looked sore but pretty good. Drew’s cries interrupted their conversation and Ali stood to go get her baby boy.

“Listen, I know you’ve got this Alex” Ken started, strategically. “But we’d both love to spend some time with Drew today” he looked at his wife and then back to his daughter. “Why don’t you go get some sleep and let us take care of him for a little while?”

Her lip quivered as she stood there looking into her father’s kind eyes. Vicki stood up and started to move towards the backstairs.

“I’ll just go get him while you decide” she offered quietly.

She was back in a few minutes with a cranky, red-faced baby and a big smile on her face. Ali saw the look on her face and knew they were both being sincere about wanting to spend time with Drew. She handed Vicki the bottle she had shown her father how to warm up, put a burp cloth over her shoulder and kissed her son on his head.

“You be a good boy for Vicki and Grandpa now, ok?”

Ali took a two hour nap, a thirty minute shower, bandaged up her thumb properly and was a new woman. She came down the backstairs at 3:45pm with a spring in her step and a smile on her face. She skidded to a halt a couple of feet into the kitchen.

“Dad” she said breathlessly, almost like a whine. “What are you doing? You didn’t have to do that.”

Ken was just putting the finishing touches on the scrub job he had done on the kitchen floor. The ceiling and walls were sparkling and almost dry too.

“Hi honey” he grinned at her as he got up off of his knees. “I’m almost finished, I wanted to have it all done for you before you got up.”

“Dad, I don’t even know what to say...” she got choked up and bit her bottom lip hard to try to keep
from crying.

“You don’t have to say anything princess. I’m happy to help. And I’m especially glad it was something I’m good at and can’t really mess up” he chuckled and started mopping the floor one last time.

“Ken the game’s about to start” Vicki said from the mudroom doorway. “Oh hi Ali, did you have a good rest?”

“Thanks Vic, will you do me a huge favor and get my shirt from the car?” he asked as he turned to his wife. “She’s so smart” he said to Ali as he quickly tried to finish the floor so he could watch the beginning of Ashlyn’s game. “She told me to bring an extra shirt in case the baby spit up on me” he chuckled and looked down at his own sweaty, dirty shirt. “And I also brought my Breakers shirt for the game” he winked. “You’d better get in there.”

It took the brunette almost the whole first half of the game to start to pay attention to it. Her head was stuck on her father and Vicki and what they had done for her that afternoon and how much it meant to her. Drew was happy to see her and hungry so she nursed him as they all sat together in the living room watching Boston beat Kansas City to almost every ball. It was frustrating because Ashlyn didn’t play. Abby Smith got her second start out of the five games for the month of August.

“Coach is saving Ash for the final push next month” Ken said confidently. “That’s what I’d do too. He knows they can’t beat Portland without her.”

“Well, she’s going to be pissed” Ali added. “She hates sitting on the bench more than anyone I’ve ever met.”

“Even more than you?” he quirked an eyebrow at his daughter.

After she had finished breastfeeding Drew, Ali had gone upstairs and changed into one of her Breakers t-shirts. They took some pictures down in the living room with Drew in his miniature mama’s keeper jersey and the rest of them in different versions of Breakers’ blue and white t-shirts and jerseys. The picture Ali took of Ken and Vicki with Drew and the dogs would get framed and stay on the mantle at Ken’s house for the rest of their time in that house. And the picture Vicki had taken of three generations of Kriegers would get the same treatment at the big old house. What had started as a hard and lonely day had been transformed into one of Ali’s favorites of the entire summer.

“I’m sorry about our ice cream date” she said later that evening after dinner.

She leaned her head on her father’s shoulder as they watched the 7pm NWSL game out of Portland in the living room. Vicki was cleaning up the dinner dishes in the kitchen and Ken had Drew in the crook of his arm, holding a toy for the baby to try and grab.

“That’s ok Alex. We’ll do it another time.” He turned and kissed the top of her head. “I’ve had such a great day today that I forgot all about it.”
The big old house got a shot of testosterone in September the likes it had never seen. Ryan came to stay with Whitney for six weeks and Kyle came to visit for two weeks. And Nathan wasn’t very far away whenever Kyle was around. Ali was ecstatic to have her brother, and Luna, staying with them for two whole weeks. Of course Kyle saw Nathan a lot, but his primary goal was to hang out with his sister and his new nephew. That meant Nathan was at the house a lot too. Ryan was a really nice guy and both Ashlyn and Ali enjoyed getting to know him better. Ali would always feel terrible about Ryan seeing her at her absolute worst back when the Instagram debacle happened. That was over 2-1/2 years ago and Ashlyn kept telling her she just had to move on. She knew for a fact that Whitney had told him that the brunette wasn’t usually like that. Even though the keeper explained this to her wife, Ali still felt like she had to be on her best behavior to make up for it. And taking care of a new baby and not getting enough sleep and trying to figure out how to go back to work part-time from home didn’t leave her with a lot of time to be on her best behavior.

“Look, Ryan, I know I apologized back when it happened, but I still feel terrible about the way I behaved when that whole Instagram thing went down.” Ali had decided to take the bull by the horns because she was tired of pussyfooting around the elephant in the room. They were sitting in the living room his first evening in the house, watching SportsCenter on the big tv. Whitney was in the kitchen and Ashlyn was walking the dogs. “I’m glad you’re here and I want you to feel at home and, I guess, I just want to sort of clear the air.” She paused and looked at him as Drew nursed, hoping Ryan would say something to help them through the conversation. But he didn’t. He didn’t even look at her. “Unless you don’t want to clear the air...” she said with a frustrated sigh.

“No, Ali, it’s not that...” he started and stopped, still looking at the tv. “Well, it’s kind of that but only because I don’t feel like there’s anything else to say.” He cleared his throat and shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“No” he let out a frustrated sigh. “This is all coming out wrong.” He turned his body a little more towards her and looked at the seat of the couch next to her, instead of at her. “Whit told me that was an extreme situation, and it was, obviously. I don’t know what I would have done in your shoes. I kind of thought you were a bitch about it but who wouldn’t be? Not that you’re a bitch...ugh. Can we please talk about this later?”

“Why can’t we talk about it now?”

Just then Whitney came back into the room, saw her fiancé’s face and body position and cracked up laughing.

“Please tell me you’re not trying to have a serious conversation with him while you’re breastfeeding” she chuckled as she sat back down on the couch and handed him a beer and Ali a bottle of water.
'Oh!' Ali chuckled. ‘Is that what the problem is? I’m sorry. I always forget about that. Sorry Ryan.’

He blushed profusely and buried his face in his big hands.

‘Oh man’ he started again, ducking his head into Whitney’s shoulder and neck. ‘I just feel like I’m intruding or something.’

‘Ryan, seriously, this is what I do now’ she chuckled again. ‘I don’t even think twice about it anymore when I’m at home. So, you’re going to have to find a way to get over that. But don’t worry. I don’t walk around topless or anything. You won’t see anything unless you’re trying to see something.’

Whitney kissed his head and giggled.

“So can we just finish this talk now?” Ali asked, hoping to be able to hear what he had to say.

“Ugh, ok” he sat up and tried to look at her like the grown ass man that he was. He focused on looking her in the eyes and only in the eyes. “Yeah, so I just meant that I don’t think there’s anything to clear up. As far as I’m concerned, we’re good. I wouldn’t be staying here in your house if I thought there was a problem.”

He looked at Whitney and smiled, relieved that he had made it through his little spiel without sounding like too much of an idiot, even though the brunette was still nursing the baby.

“Nice job hon” Whitney praised him and patted his thigh as he took a swig of beer.

“Well that’s great to hear” Ali smiled at the couple. “But I’ve got to warn you, I’m probably not going to be my best self while you’re here” she sighed and rolled her eyes. “So, please try not to judge me too harshly ok?” She smiled again when he cautiously turned to look at her. “I get cranky when I don’t get enough sleep” she explained with a shrug.

The Breakers played two games the first week of September. Wednesday night Ali, Ryan and Sydney went to the stadium to watch the team take down Sky Blue for win number 13 on the season. Vicki had come to the big old house to watch Drew for the night and Ali could not have been more grateful. She was going to take him to the game with her, but she was happier knowing he was safe at home, not having his bedtime messed up. Then they went back to the suite at the stadium on Saturday afternoon to watch Houston go down as Boston won their fourteenth game. Baby Drew and little Cash both attended that game with their moms. It was one of the busiest times of the year for the city of Boston and its’ surrounding areas. All of the Universities and Colleges were starting up again and the city was inundated with college students and their families making the move back to their dorms and apartments. Sometimes it was almost impossible to navigate the streets because they were clogged with moving vans and U-hauls and clueless eighteen year olds.

That whole back to school vibe was happening and it invigorated the entire city and metropolitan area. The stadium reflected it too. The Breakers had been drawing a good crowd all season long. Some games were sellouts and some weren’t, but none were less than three quarters full. During that first week of September they sold out both games and neither Sky Blue or Houston were playoff caliber teams. Ali made a mental note to try and figure out some sort of college kid marketing approach going forward. They were flocking to the stadium and she wanted to make sure Ashlyn was welcoming them somehow.
The second week of September was much more normal in terms of scheduling. That Sunday, the day after the Houston game, Ashlyn had another one of her soccer camps up in Southern New Hampshire. She, Whitney and Ryan drove up together and Morgan Andrews, a native New Hampshire girl, drove up with Marcy and helped all day with the camp too. That was also the day that Kyle arrived for his two-week visit. Nathan, Kyle and Luna pulled up the driveway just before lunchtime and honked the horn loudly.

“It’s going to be a short, painful visit if you keep that shit up” Ali sent a stern look her brother’s way as she met him in the mudroom. “And don’t blame Nathan, I know it was you honking the horn. There’s a baby here now. If you wake him up while he’s sleeping you will die.”

“Love you too sis!” he grinned as he picked her up and twirled her around several times. He refused to stop until she was giggling in his arms. “That’s better” he said breathlessly as he set her down again. “There’s my sissy.”

The dogs were happy to see Luna and whined excitedly as they walked around each other in a circle of wagging tails. Nathan came in a few minutes later, carrying Kyle’s suitcase. Ali greeted him with a hug and a kiss and told her brother to go get his own damned luggage. Ken and Vicki came over in the afternoon and stayed for a backyard barbecue that started once Ashlyn, Whitney and Ryan got home from soccer camp. Kyle couldn’t get over how big Drew had gotten or how tired his sister looked.

“Oh man, this is nothing” Ashlyn explained when he brought up the subject of sleep in the big old house. “He’s sleeping almost six hours at a time at night now” she nodded at her son, nestled into Kyle’s chest as they all sat in the backyard waiting for the steaks to cook. “Ali gets up with him once during the night now, instead of two or three or, God, it used to be four times sometimes.” She chuckled and looked at her wife who was sitting on the other side of the yard talking with Vicki and Ryan. “I don’t know how she fucking did it.”

“So my plan of waiting to come visit until everything was much easier worked perfectly” Kyle joked and kissed his nephew’s sleeping head.

There was one game for the Breakers that week and they had to travel to Minnesota for the Saturday afternoon, televised, game of the week. When Ashlyn and Whitney left late Friday morning for their trip, Ali found herself, for the first time she could remember since probably early in college, in a house full of men. She was worried that Ryan would feel like the odd man out because he barely knew Kyle and was just meeting Nathan for the first time. But he was great with them, and great with the baby too. All three of them were uncomfortable holding Drew at first, he was so tiny in their big arms, especially Ryan and Kyle. Nathan wasn’t nearly as big or strong as they were. He wasn’t short or skinny, but in comparison to Kyle who was sculpted and in crazy good shape and Ryan who was 6’6” tall and only two years out of his professional athlete body and training, he looked like a normal guy. He was actually a couple inches taller than Kyle and in good shape himself. He was a runner so their bodies were totally different. Nathan was lean and 6’ 2” tall and fit. Ali couldn’t think of any of her brother’s gay friends who weren’t at least fit if not built. She found herself contemplating the male physique in general that Saturday as they got ready to watch the Breakers game in the living room. She was used to seeing her brother half naked all the time, honestly, he was shirtless more often than not. But she watched Nathan and Ryan as they changed into their Breakers t-shirts and jerseys so they could all take a group picture to send to Ashlyn and Whitney, and she remembered why she had always been attracted to men as well as women.

There would always be a part of her, however tiny, that missed the feeling she sometimes got when she was with a big, strong guy who could pick her up easily or wrap her up in a big strong hug so
she would practically disappear in his arms. There was something she found comforting about being physically smaller and weaker than the guy she was dating. She was sure it was tied up in all of the stereotypes she had bought into as a girl growing up and being taught to need a man to protect her and provide for her. She knew it was mostly bullshit. But she also knew what she liked. She liked to feel little sometimes and like someone would be big and strong enough to keep her safe if necessary. That’s partly why she was so attracted to Ashlyn. She was taller and stronger than Ali and she definitely made her feel safe and protected. What the brunette found fascinating was how little she had ever been attracted to a man’s mind or even his heart. It had always been primarily physical for her, which explains why her relationships with men, few though there were, had been so unsatisfying. The truth was that Ali couldn’t picture herself with a man anymore. Even when she looked back at her past, those images and memories seemed dimmer to her. She couldn’t see herself with anybody but Ashlyn, truthfully. But, if somebody forced her to picture herself with someone else, there’s no way it wouldn’t be another woman. Ali thought women were incredible, both physically and mentally. She definitely preferred women now but she found herself, that afternoon, appreciating men and how wonderful they could be.

“Hell-ooo...anybody in there?” Kyle waved his hand in front of her face as she stared off into space. “Are you having a little nap with your eyes still open or what?” he teased and nuded her shoulder.

“What? Oh, yeah. Sorry” she grinned sheepishly at her annoying brother whom she loved so much. “Just thinking.”

“Well the game’s about to start so hold your boy up and get in the middle of this picture so we can get serious about kicking some Minnesota ass.”

Kyle wanted the total immersion experience and he got it. By the end of his first week of vacation he had been peed on and puked on at least twice and had gotten really good at changing a diaper. He had learned his lesson about diapers that weren’t quite tight enough the hard way and ended up having to wash all of the sheets as well as the liner of the crib after one of Drew’s naps. And Uncle Kyle had fallen madly in love with his baby nephew in the process. He practically broke down in tears when Drew would laugh or giggle. He swore he had never heard a better sound in his life. Drew, for his part, seemed to love his Uncle Kyle too. He was fascinated by his beard and tried to tug at it every chance he got. Kyle took a lot of beautiful pictures that week but Ali got a couple of her own that immediately made the short list of her favorites. One was of Kyle asleep on the family room couch with the late morning sun streaming through the window. Drew was asleep on his chest, Kyle’s hand protectively on his little bum to hold him in place. She was going to save that one and give it to her brother for Christmas.

“You guys know you’ve gotta help us right?” she asked out of the blue that afternoon as the Breakers defeated Minnesota to win their fifteenth game of the season.

All three men turned to look at her and she smiled as she saw Drew gripping Kyle’s fingers and trying to put them into his mouth.

“What’s the matter sis?” he asked, his face frowning and full of concern.

“No, I don’t mean it like that. I mean, you guys are going to have to help us teach him how to be a good man” she smiled at them and blinked her eyes as they stared back at her. “We can teach him most of it from our perspective, but, well, we’re counting on you to fill in the stuff we have no way of knowing.” She paused and saw Ryan look down shyly. “You too Ryan. You’re going to be a big part of his life and Ashlyn says you’re one of the finest people she’s ever known. She wouldn’t let just anybody marry her best friend you know” she teased a little and he grinned at her.
“Anything you need Al.”

“Always” Nathan added.

“You should have thought of this before you made his most far away relatives his godparents” Kyle said with a straight face and then giggled. “I’m just saying.”

The Breakers had the next week off thanks to the FIFA schedule. Whitney and Ryan went to Long Island to visit Ryan’s family for the week. And Kyle spent a couple of nights that week in Boston with Nathan. Ashlyn and Ali enjoyed some time together, just the two of them with their baby son, and couldn’t believe how much they loved their little family. It was a hot week and they went to the beach and played with Drew in the surf, laughing at the faces he made when a wave rolled into him as they all sat there together in six inches of water. Ashlyn didn’t think she had ever been more at peace. She was with the love of her life, in the sea, playing with their infant son, all of them happy and healthy. It just didn’t get any better than that.

Now that Drew was sleeping for a solid six hours at night, they were able to get back to a more normal sleep schedule themselves. It had been a big adjustment for them to go to bed at separate times and sometimes even in different beds. If Drew was having a fussy night, Ali would just sleep in the twin bed in the nursery. She wanted to be near him and she didn’t want to wake her keeper up by using the monitor in the bedroom. Ashlyn was working and doing her job and trying to keep her body and mind in shape so she didn’t get injured on the field and also so her team could win another championship. It was very important to Ali to make sure Ashlyn got the sleep she needed. The brunette wasn’t trying to be a martyr. She also understood that both of their livelihoods depended, to a large degree, on the keeper’s success on the pitch. What all that added up to was that the couple really missed a lot of the simple, intimate times they used to share together. It had only been three and a half months, but Ashlyn really missed, for example, getting ready for bed together. They used to do that almost every single night and then get into bed together and read or talk before going to sleep. And Ali missed sharing a bed with her wife. When she woke up these days she wasn’t sure where the hell she was half the time. It was unsettling and she just missed having Ashlyn close to her. They both understood it was temporary so they didn’t spend a lot of time complaining about it. But now that Ali was only getting up for one middle of the night feeding, they were happy to start doing more of both of those things. Ali would start staying up later and taking an afternoon nap when Drew napped to stay caught up on her sleep. If she couldn’t get a nap then she would just have to go to bed earlier. But to even have the option on the table at all was exciting for both women.

And, they were hoping that their non-existent sex life would start to get back to normal again too. The six uninterrupted hours of sleep was the first step in that direction. The first night they were alone in the house, one of the nights that Kyle was at Nathan’s, Ali put the baby to bed for the night at 8pm and closed the door to the nursery behind her as she went into the hall. She stopped short when she felt something unusual under her bare feet. The brunette looked down at her feet and smiled when she saw a bunch of rose petals scattered around outside the nursery door. What was her romantic wife up to now? She followed the rose petals to their bedroom door and softly knocked on it a couple of times.

“Ash? Can I come in?”

“Come in” the blonde replied from the other side of the door.

Ali held her breath and turned the door knob, pushing the door open and stepping across more rose petals and into the bedroom. She walked through the narrow entrance to the room, past the dressers
and Ashlyn’s closet, and exhaled as she finally saw her gorgeous wife. Ashlyn was stretched out diagonally across the bed, completely naked, leaning up on one elbow with her head over near Ali’s pillow. The room was dimly lit with soft light coming from the partially opened bathroom door and the nightlight they had put in by Ashlyn’s closet because Ali kept stubbing her toe on the dresser when she made her middle of the night trips to the nursery. There was soft music playing, a sexy new playlist the brunette didn’t recognize, and there were candles lit strategically around the room. An ice bucket with a small bottle of champagne sticking out of it sat on Ali’s nightstand with two flutes of champagne already poured, next to it.

“Ashlyn” she breathed out from the foot of the bed as her heart pounded and her emotions started to take off.

“Hi beautiful” the keeper said seductively. “Care to join me?”

If Sydney had told her this story Ali probably would have thought it was cheesy as hell. But having Ashlyn do it for her felt wonderfully romantic. She nodded her reply and moved to her side of the bed on the right, never taking her eyes off of the sexy blonde. Ali followed Ashlyn’s lead when she picked up her champagne flute and held it up in a toast.

“Here’s to six hours and, hopefully, the beginning of a more normal schedule for us all.”

“I will definitely drink to that” Ali chuckled and clinked her glass to her wife’s before taking a big swig.

She sat on the edge of the bed and leaned towards Ashlyn who met her lips with a soft and tender kiss.

“I love you Ali” she said solemnly as she put her empty champagne flute on the nightstand. “We don’t have to do this if you’re tired” she began, “but I thought I’d give it a shot” she smirked.

“I’m always tired babe” the brunette chuckled in a low voice, “but I am definitely up for this.” She licked her lips and put her glass next to Ashlyn’s. “You are so gorgeous Ashlyn, I swear to God you completely take my breath away.”

The keeper lowered her eyes shyly and then felt her wife’s weight on the bed shift and her hand lift her chin up. She met her favorite chocolate eyes and sucked in a breath when she saw all the love and emotion and desire in every inch of Ali’s beautiful face. The brunette leaned over to kiss her wife’s lips as she cupped her face with her left hand. It was a tender, loving kiss that they both breathed into, soft lips sweetly moving together. Ashlyn deepened the kiss, slipping her tongue between Ali’s lips and probing her familiar but still exciting mouth. The brunette moved her left hand down her wife’s neck and collar bone and chest, trailing her fingers delicately and making goosebumps appear. She traced a circle around Ashlyn’s nipple and then cupped her breast, gently squeezing the pretty pink nub with her thumb. The keeper’s nipples started to stiffen as she arched her back and pressed her breast against Ali’s strong hand.

“Mmmmmmm” she hummed against the brunette’s lips as they broke the slow and steamy kiss for air. “God, you make me so crazy baby” she breathed out. “I want to see you” she said softly, trying not to be too demanding. “You’re so beautiful Ali” she moved her lips down the brunette’s jaw and to the soft, sensitive skin behind her ear, making Ali moan in response. “Can I see you?”

They had been having fairly regular sex since Ali’s birthday weekend up in Maine. That had been six or seven weeks ago and they had been making time to have sex about once a week, sometimes less. They both wanted it and were both comfortable initiating it. It was usually hurried and squeezed in during one of Drew’s naps. Occasionally they had sex at night, one of them groping
and fumbling with the other, both half-asleep before they woke up horny as hell and quickly exchanged orgasms before going back to sleep. They didn’t even take their pajamas off during those sleepy interludes. It wasn’t ideal but it was sex and it was good enough for both of them as they learned to be intimate while taking care of a three and then four month old baby. Ali had learned to accept her body in whatever state it happened to be in when they had sex. There was no more primping or preening before they got down to business. Her legs weren’t always shaved, nor was her bikini area, when those unplanned urges kicked in. Oh well. Neither were Ashlyn’s all the time. They were both tired and doing the best they could. They had been honest with each other about what they wanted and what they were comfortable with and uncomfortable with and it had been going well so far. Ali’s body was looking and feeling more like it had pre-pregnancy but she still had a ways to go. Ashlyn knew she could be sensitive about it and that’s why she asked her beautiful brunette to share her body with her instead of just ripping her clothes off as she might have done in the past.

The first time Ali’s breasts leaked milk when she had an orgasm had been a surprise for both women. Ali had been embarrassed and confused but Ashlyn hadn’t missed a beat. She just moved up her wife’s still quivering body and licked up the small amount of breastmilk from each breast. She held the brunette close as she caught her breath, pressing kisses all over her neck, shoulders and chest. Finally, once Ali’s breathing had steadied, she brought their lips together in a deep and passionate kiss. They never talked about the breastmilk that first time. But it happened a lot. And, they discovered after researching it, the same hormone that made Ali’s milk ‘let down’ so she could feed Drew was also released during an orgasm. So her body was only doing what the hormones were telling it to do.

“I’m just telling you that I don’t care about your breastmilk honey” Ashlyn was trying to get to the bottom of why Ali insisted on wearing a nursing bra, with breast pads inside, every time they had sex. “That’s all.” She was rubbing Ali’s feet one evening in early August after the brunette had gotten into bed for her earlier than usual bedtime. “If you’re wearing it because it’s supportive and helps your boobs feel better then I’m all for it. I just don’t want you wearing it so the pads will absorb the milk. If that’s why you’re wearing it then I want you to stop.”

Ali wore a nursing bra practically all day every day. She owned eight of them by then, in slightly different sizes as her breasts continued to change. Ashlyn was worried because the brunette used to hate sleeping in a bra or panties. She was always going on about how the body needed some time during the day, or night, to be free and not constricted. The second time her breasts had leaked during sex they had leaked a lot. Like, a whole lot and not even the keeper could hide her surprise. As always, she had recovered quickly and licked up a lot of it and then decided to use the rest of it, that was literally all over Ali’s stomach, as a sort of really organic massage oil. She had read that breastmilk was a good natural moisturizer for Ali’s sore and chapped nipples so it seemed like a logical thing to the blonde. She rubbed her hands in the milk and spread it around her wife’s still twitching abdomen and hips and thighs. It seemed perfectly natural, but Ali had gotten up and taken a shower as soon as she had given the blonde an orgasm.

“No, it helps them roll around less. I wear it for the support” Ali lied a little.

The nursing bras did indeed help her breasts and back feel better all of the time, and especially during sex. That part was all true. But she had only started using the pads inside the bra after that big squirt show had happened.

“Al” the blonde smiled softly up at her wife as she switched to her other foot. “If you want to keep wearing one when we have sex I’m totally cool with that, even though I really miss your boobs. I get it. They’re busy these days and they’re not always in the mood” she winked at her. “But I couldn’t care less if your milk lets down when you come. I consider it a good thing actually” she
smirked at her wife as she continued massaging her foot. “It means I gave you a good orgasm.”

And Ashlyn had been understanding of everything that presented itself during those intense first few months after the baby was born. But that shouldn’t have surprised Ali because she had been the exact same way all throughout the entire pregnancy. As long as her brunette was as comfortable as possible, the keeper didn’t care about anything Ali’s body did. And just as it had happened when they first started having sex together over three years ago, Ali gradually rose up to Ashlyn’s comfort level and met her there. Over the past seven weeks she figured out that she was less likely to leak milk, or at least not nearly as much milk would leak out, if she nursed the baby before they had sex. So that’s what they did on a night or a day when they planned to be intimate. But those unplanned trysts still presented the same less than comfortable situation for the brunette. By the time of the September rose petal rendezvous, Ali was almost ok with it. The trust level she shared with the blonde was remarkably high. The good news for that night was that she had just fed Drew so she wasn’t that worried about it one way or the other.

“Yes” Ali whispered her permission and then moaned again as the blonde sucked her way down her neck to her pulse point. She was so moved by Ashlyn’s sweet, thoughtful rose petal display that she would have said yes to almost anything. It was just the type of romantic gesture the keeper always seemed to pull off right when Ali needed it most. “I love you.”

“I love you too baby. You’re so fucking sexy I can barely think” Ashlyn moaned as she pulled herself to sit up closer to Ali so she could remove her clothes.

Ali let her left hand slide down to her wife’s hip and then thigh as she enjoyed Ashlyn’s lips at the base of her throat. She lifted both arms up above her head as her keeper lifted the loose-fitting nursing top off of her.

“Do you want to keep this on?” Ashlyn asked breathlessly, pulling her lips away from the brunette’s neck as she touched the soft material of her nursing bra.

“No babe, you can take it off, just...”

“Don’t worry, I won’t touch them unless you ask me to” she grinned slyly at her wife as she reached around behind her and unhooked the pale yellow undergarment and kissed her lips again.

It was only a few minutes more before Ali was completely naked and enjoying her wife’s strong hands caressing and massaging every inch of her body, except for her swollen, tender breasts. The brunette was propped up on a couple of pillows against the headboard and Ashlyn settled herself on top of her hips as she finished massaging her arms, resting them gently on the bed beside her one at a time. She leaned forward and placed the softest kisses she could along the tops of Ali’s breasts and then kept her word and made herself stop before diving lower and burying her face between them like she really wanted to.

“I’m sorry they’re so sore honey” Ali’s face was tender as she reached her hands out and put them on her wife’s thighs in front of her. “I can’t imagine not being able to touch yours for so long...I’m really sorry.”

“I miss them, that’s for sure” the blonde admitted with a small smile. “But it’s ok. They’re doing the most important thing right now. I’ll survive.” She took a deep breath and exhaled a long sigh as she gazed longingly at them. They were twice as big as usual and looked beautiful. The dark nipples looked red and sore, like they’d been used to feed a baby for almost four months. “It won’t be easy, but I’ll make it.”

The look on the blonde’s face moved Ali. It turned her on and made her wet as hell, but it also
stirred something more compassionate in her at the same time.

“Can we try something?” she asked tentatively, waiting for Ashlyn’s eyes to meet her own.

“Anything baby, what are you thinking?” Ashlyn started slowly grinding against her wife’s mound, getting even hornier at the thought of Ali ready to try something.

“I think I’d like to try the strap-on, I think I’m ready for that.” Her words were confident but her face was fighting the fear she was feeling.

“How about we try it?” the keeper asked as she moved her hands across Ali’s stomach and sides. “You look a little nervous.”

“I am a little nervous, but I think if I ride you I’ll be able to control it more and that makes me feel better” she explained but saw her keeper’s face fall a bit as she spoke. “Not that I don’t trust you” she added, just in the nick of time she hoped. “You’ve been so good and careful with me all through everything honey. I can’t imagine anybody taking better care of me.” She squeezed Ashlyn’s thighs and slid her hands up to her hips and sides, trying to get her attention. “And I was hoping you would do me a favor and hold on to these babies” she looked down at her own breasts “While I’m riding you. What do you think?”

Ashlyn couldn’t keep the smile from her face for more than a second.

“I think we should get started and see how it goes.”

Forty-five minutes later Ashlyn was in Ali’s position, propped up against the headboard, and the brunette was grinding in a circle with the strap-on buried deep inside her. It had been a slow build up and it had taken more than a few minutes for Ali to adjust to the slender dildo. But she had adjusted and she had found her rhythm, slow though it was. Ashlyn let her do all the work, keeping her hips still as her wife had asked.

“Unnhhhhh, oh God babe...” Ali panted out as she closed her eyes for another few seconds. “Fuck, that feels so good.”

Ashlyn’s hands were out in front of her, carefully cupping her wife’s big breasts as they bounced and moved along with her motions. Ali would grind back and forth for a while and then around in a circular motion before using her thighs and pumping herself up and down on the slender pink strap-on. That’s when she really needed her keeper’s hands to hold on tightly. Ashlyn loved every minute of it and wouldn’t have sped any part of it up for anything. She had a tremendous view of her gorgeous wife and the steady pressure from the back of the dildo on her own clit had her feeling very good. And, for the first time in very long time, she was able to touch Ali’s breasts. It was awesome but it was kind of torture at the same time. She had thought this part through enough or she might have realized how hard it would be to touch them and hold them but then not be able to touch her nipples or taste any part of them. It only made her want them more.

“You’re so fucking hot Al. Jesus fucking Christ.”

Ali went back to grinding again and, after a few more minutes, she groaned long and low and her heavily lidded eyes closed almost all the way as she arched her back and opened her mouth a little bit. She moved her hand to her own clit and started rubbing it as she kept groaning.

“Oh God, oooh yeah, unnnhhhh...I’m gonna come babe...”

She rubbed her clit harder and rocked back and forth faster on the dildo as she felt her orgasm building. Ali forced her eyes open and the look of white hot lust in them was almost enough to
“Fucking hell baby” the blonde moaned and fought every impulse in her body that was telling her to thrust her hips up for more contact. This was for Ali. Her turn would come next. “Come on” she urged hoarsely. “You’re so gorgeous...so fucking beautiful...”

“Ohhhh!!! Yessssss!!!” Ali screamed and doubled over, still rubbing her clit and moving against the dildo as she came loud and hard.

Ashlyn tried to hold onto her breasts but she couldn’t do it when the brunette bent over. She released them quickly, changed the positions of her hands from fingers up to fingers down and palms up and put them back in place as Ali’s orgasm tore through her. The keeper felt just a little bit of milk in each of her palms and was relieved, for her wife’s sake. Ali shook and panted and moaned as she rode it out, finally jumping up and off of the strap-on when she couldn’t stand it another second. She lay on her side next to the blonde, with an arm draped lazily across her taut, tight stomach, and tried to catch her breath.

“Oh my God” she panted out, still twitching a little bit. “That took forever but it was sooo good. Thank you so much honey.” She leaned over and kissed the side of her keeper’s breast that was right in front of her. “Wow” she breathed out and kissed Ashlyn’s soft skin again.

The blonde was about to explode. She was trying to wait for her turn and for her wife to recover but she was losing the struggle with her mounting desire. Watching the most beautiful woman in the world have an orgasm had only made it harder to stay in control. Ashlyn unhooked the harness, slipped it off and brought the dildo to her lips. She licked Ali’s delicious juices off of it, moaning quietly as she did so. The keeper brought both of her knees up as she felt Ali’s hand moving up to fondle her breasts, the nipples quickly forming hard pebbles under her fingertips. Ashlyn took the dildo in one hand and used her other hand to spread her pussy lips open, groaning when she felt how wet she really was.

“Fuck” she said softly, her eyes closed and her breathing ragged as she pushed the dildo into her own entrance with a satisfied sigh.

Ashlyn started thrusting, slowly for a few strokes and then faster as she felt herself climbing. Ali’s nimble fingers felt incredible as they moved from one breast to the other.

“Ashlyn...” she breathed out as she became aware of what was going on between her wife’s legs. “Let me...”

“No” she husked out. “Don’t stop what you’re doing.” Her words were short and clipped but the brunette knew it was just because she was about to come. “Kiss me” she commanded in a half-gasp.

Ali lifted herself up on her elbow and brought their lips together in a passionate kiss as she continued to work up her keeper’s breasts and nipples. “I love you” Ali breathed out as their lips pulled apart so Ashlyn could breathe.

“Ohhhh fuck” Ashlyn groaned as she moved her other hand to her own clit and began rubbing it as hard and fast as she could as she chased her orgasm.

The brunette licked and sucked along her wife’s strong jaw over to her ear and then down her slightly sweaty neck, moaning and humming in pleasure as she went. She leaned over her wife’s chest to get to the other side of her neck, loving the feel of their breasts together.
“Aliiii!!!!” the keeper cried out as she came hard.

All of Ashlyn’s muscles contracted and she shook and jerked as she pumped and rubbed as long as she could to extend her high. She stopped moving both her hands, pulling the dildo out and dropping it on the bed between her legs. She wrapped her arms around her wife and held her close against her chest for several minutes as she panted and twitched.

“Oh, baby...that was...wow.” Ashlyn squeezed her beautiful brunette tightly and tried to breathe.

They stayed in that position for a long time, kissing softly and touching with gentle fingers as their breathing evened out.

“Do you know what I really want to do tonight” Ali spoke quietly, her lips right next to her wife’s ear. “I want to fall asleep naked with you” she kissed the sensitive skin behind Ashlyn’s ear.

“When was the last time we did that?”

“Ohoh, that sounds so good” the keeper agreed with a grin. Drew won’t care what we’re wearing, or not wearing, and there’s nobody else here tonight to bump into” she chuckled. “Let’s do it.”

And that’s just what they did, both women relishing the simplest pleasure of bare skin on bare skin. They had slept together like that hundreds of times before and taken it for granted. Never again.
“I can’t believe you’re not spending your last night, a Saturday night no less, with Nathan in the city” Ali teased her big brother as she handed the baby to him so he could burp him. “Passing up all that gay debauchery to sit here with us boring parental people.”

“Ha ha, very funny” he patted his nephew on the back, trying to coax a burp out of the boy.

He had just spent the night before at Nathan’s apartment, the second time that week, and there was no way he was missing another minute with Drew before he and Luna left for NYC the next afternoon. It was hard to believe two weeks had gone by so damned fast. It was late Saturday afternoon and time for Drew’s nap. They, along with Ashlyn, had just come back from Cassius Dwyer’s second birthday party down at Sydney and Dom’s house. Whitney and Ryan wouldn’t be returning until the next afternoon and Ashlyn was out running errands after dropping them at the big old house. Nathan was joining them for dinner and would be there in a couple of hours. The same went for Ken and Vicki.

“So is the honeymoon over or what” Ali chuckled as she hooked the front of her bra back up and pulled the flap down on her nursing top. “It’s been almost a year and a half, right?”

“Oh stop” Kyle chastised her. “We can’t all be as in love as you two lovebirds. The world just can’t handle it” he giggled at his sister.

“Are you guys having problems?” she asked, looking at him seriously for the first time during their conversation. “I was only kidding, but that sounds like…”

“Just...stop. Ok?” Kyle held his hand out to ward off any more conversation.

“Really Ky” she sat up and turned to face him, sitting next to her on the living room couch. “Is everything ok? What’s going on?” She placed her hand on his leg and patted it affectionately.

Drew burped loudly and laughed, which made Kyle get emotional. He crumbled every time the baby laughed.

“Good boy” he praised and gave him a big kiss on his cheek. “You did a good job buddy.” He settled Drew into the crook of his arm, making sure he was sitting up, and held the cutest little giraffe squeeze toy in front of him. “What’s this?” he asked in a cute baby-talk voice as he started to play with the baby.

“Kyle. Please talk to me.”

“Ugh, there’s nothing to talk about really” he sighed loudly and rolled his eyes. “Being in a relationship is hard. And we don’t all always get along like you two do…”

“Will you quit saying that?” Ali interrupted him. “That’s the stupidest thing to say. Do you honestly think Ashlyn and I don’t have our problems?”

“Oh please, you guys were made for each other. I’ve never seen two people more in love.”

“That doesn’t mean we don’t have to work for it. And you guys are just as made for each other as we are. I said that to Ashlyn before you ever got together.”

“What?” he challenged her with his eyes.
“I told her how perfect you guys were for each other and she told me not to try and push you together – which I did not do, by the way, you’re welcome. And I remember saying something like this must be how Syd and Whit felt when Ash and I were taking so long to get together.”

“Really?”

“Really. I’ve always known you two would be great together. Nathan is the best. He’s crazy about you but he doesn’t put up with any of your bullshit. That’s my favorite thing about him, besides the fact that he’s so sweet to you.”

They were quiet for a few minutes as they watched the baby try and reach for the toy giraffe in Kyle’s hand.

“I’ve never dated anyone for this long before” he admitted softly. “They’ve always gotten tired of me by now.”

Ali’s heart hurt when she heard her brother’s words, but she didn’t want to interrupt him again. She wanted to let him say what he was ready to say.

“And once the newness wears off, well, it gets harder. Better too, but harder.” He paused and looked at his sister. “You guys have to work on things too?”

“Of course we do” she smiled warmly at him. “We do great most of the time, but there are times where it’s really difficult. And, if I didn’t love her so much, it would be easy to think about letting it go.”

“What?!” he asked, unable to hide his surprise.

“Well, obviously, I love her way too much for that to ever happen. But that’s how you know you’re with the right person Ky. When it gets hard you think for a second about ending it but then realize you wouldn’t be able to breathe without her. That’s how it was for me anyway.”

“I think the distance is starting to be a problem for us. For me anyway, but I think for Nate too.”

“So do something about it. I’d hate it if I had to be apart from Ash for as long as you guys have been doing it. That would make me crazy. There’s no way I could do it.”

“Well, that’s the problem we’re having” Kyle squirmed a little uncomfortably at the thought of saying any of this out loud to another person. “I want to move back to Boston but he doesn’t want me to leave New York for him. And he wants to move to New York, but...”

“You don’t want him to sacrifice for you” she finished his sentence and smiled at him again. “That, bb, is love. That’s the real deal right there. That’s what they write poetry about.”

“It’s been so nice being up here with him, and you guys, these two weeks. It’s just making it harder to be apart and we’re both cranky about it.”

“Kyle, it’s been long enough. You guys both know you’re real and it’s time to take the next step. I’ll bet that’s what’s going on. You’re both frustrated and ready for more.”

They were quiet again, listening to Drew gurgle and make adorable sounds as he played with the toy giraffe.

“Why won’t you let him move to New York for you?” she asked tentatively, afraid of what her brother’s answer would be. “And you had better not say it’s because you don’t think you’re worth
“It’s partly that, but I struggle with that a lot of the time anyway” he chuckled and rolled his eyes before getting serious again. “He makes me feel special all the time. He’s really good to me Al.”

“So then why on earth won’t you let him come live with you and treat you like that every damned day?”

“What if it doesn’t work out though?” his voice was almost a whisper as his darkest fear slipped through his lips.

Ali tilted her head and put her arm around his broad shoulders. She held him for a few seconds and then pulled her arm back and rested it on top of his closest shoulder with a squeeze. She looked at him intently and waited for him to lift his eyes and look at her before speaking again.

“But what if it does?” She let her words linger for another minute before continuing. “I had the exact same conversation with Sydney about this. I swear to God. I said the exact same thing you just did. I was terrified. But Syd was right. She knew we would work and she pushed me to fight that fear and try it. And she was fucking right. And it was the scariest thing I’ve ever done” she chuckled but then got emotional again. “And it was the best thing that ever happened to me. Please don’t let your fear hold you back. He’s worth the risk, don’t you think?”

Things at Knight-Harris continued to be busy and productive. Ali was back to work part-time, almost all of it from home. She had planned to go to the office once a week and she was trying to make that happen, but she found it so hard to leave Drew. It was infinitely easier to bring him up to her office on the third floor for a few hours while she worked remotely. Ashlyn encouraged her to do what felt right and she would support her no matter what. She had been so sweet and supportive at the beginning of September when Ali officially went back part-time. It reminded the brunette of how good her wife had been to her on her very first day of her MBA classes. Her morning had started with the blonde making her a big, delicious breakfast. She gave Ali a big kiss and then waved to her as she held their son and the brunette walked up the backstairs to take a shower and get dressed for the day. There was a present waiting for her on their bed when she came out of the shower. She opened the card first, which had a beautiful photograph of a lion on the front and was blank inside. Ashlyn had written a short r.m. drake poem inside.

“she slept with wolves without fear, for the wolves knew a lion was among them.”

Then she had written:
“Good luck on your first official day back to work baby. Don’t ever be afraid to let your Leo roar. It takes courage to be the king of the jungle. Drew and I got you a couple of things that might help you remember how awesome you are and that you can do anything you set your mind to. We love you! Love, Ashlyn & Drew”

Ali couldn’t help the tears that started to fall down her cheeks. Her keeper had always correlated her bravery and courage with a lion because of her zodiac sign, Leo. How did she always know just when to boost her up a little bit? Ashlyn always managed to help her beat the nerves or anxiety she was feeling, and she did it before Ali had even asked for help. The brunette found her wife and son
in the nursery, playing with some toys on the colorful road and racing track rug in the middle of the room.

“Ashlyn, thank you so much honey. I love my gifts, and the beautiful card” she cocked her head and looked adoringly at her keeper. “You’re so sweet to me.”

“You’re welcome sugar plum” Ashlyn grinned up at her from the floor as Drew put the corner of a block into his mouth. “Do you like the portfolio? I almost got the dark brown, but I thought the black would go better with most of your outfits.”

This woman was just too much. It was lovely enough that she had gotten a beautiful leather portfolio for her and then had it embossed. But to find out that she had put so much thought into the color and her reasoning behind her choice was other level. And typical Ashlyn.

“I love it. It’ll go great with my briefcase too” Ali got on her hands and knees, still in her robe after her shower, and kissed her wife soundly. “And the pen is gorgeous. I’ll be afraid to write with it I think” she teased and kissed her again. “I’ve never even seen anything like it. How did you find it?”

The keeper had given her wife a beautiful, way too expensive, Montblanc fountain pen with a cap that was a replica of the Taj Mahal. Ashlyn knew that sometimes in her wife’s line of work appearances mattered. She also knew that Ali loved architecture and that visiting the Taj Mahal was on her bucket list.

“You’d be surprised what you can find with a good old ‘Google’ search” she laughed and leaned in for one last kiss before Ali stood up again.

“Really babe, you’re just the best. Thank you.”

“Now go on, you don’t want to be late on your first day back” Ashlyn shooed her out of the room with a wink.

It was funny because Ali didn’t have set hours. She worked whenever there was work to do and that’s how it had always been. Sometimes she was emailing at 7am and other times she was on the phone with an athlete or an agent on the west coast at 10:30pm. But she wanted to go into the office for at least a few hours that day and try to establish some sort of routine for the next three months until she was back to work full-time. And they had been waiting until this week to hire the two new agents. Ali would call and make the offers herself. Sela Shapiro would be coming on immediately as an agent specializing in the WNBA. She represented a couple of tennis players and a few golfers as well. She had experience but had never worked at a firm like this before. It had all been freelance for her up to this point. She was in her early forties and she was African American, which Ali was really happy about. She wanted to have a diverse team and had made that a priority with this round of hiring. The other new agent was Christian Agnew and he came with less experience but bigger clientele. He represented five or six lower-level NBA players and a few WNBA players as well. He was in his thirties and kind of a pretty-boy type. Ali wasn’t sure that she would like him very much if they hung out a lot, but he came highly recommended and had a great resume and references from his previous firm. He was looking to relocate from the west coast back east and that’s why he was available. Something about him didn’t sit quite right with the brunette but everybody else on the board voted yes so he was hired.

Luckily for the brunette, the Breakers only had one training that day and it was in the afternoon. It was crunch time for their season and a lot of players were banged up and they were playing Los Angeles the next night at home and then the final game of the season would be Saturday afternoon when Portland came to town. It was a busy week for the team and the coach was trying to make
The issue of child care had been something neither woman wanted to think about just yet, but they were going to have to figure something out soon. That day, for example, Ashlyn and Whitney were bringing Drew to training with them and then Ali would come pick him up and take him home with her after a short stadium visit. For the next three months they were going to rely on Vicki for the times when they couldn’t make something like that work. Ali wasn’t ready to be separated from her baby yet so it would only be one day a week, when she went to the office and Ashlyn couldn’t be around. Vicki had been a stay at home mom for the past eighteen years, once Koty was born. Her ex-husband, Vince, was a mechanical engineer and worked for a big firm that moved him around. He had settled out in California after their divorce seven years earlier and not been involved very much in the boys’ lives other than birthday cards and Christmas gifts. He was one of those people who just wasn’t very good with humans. He was better with machines. Ali had often wondered how Vicki had ever ended up with him in the first place. But every time she was about to pass judgment on her step-mother for making bad choices she would remember Emily and chastise herself. Vince made good money and Vicki never had to work outside the home as she raised her two sons. She had a bachelor’s degree in Criminal Justice from the University of Michigan, where she had met her first husband, and had planned to go to law school after graduation. She got pregnant, married Vince and lived her happy housewife life. But as her boys got older and spent less time at home she completed a certificate program and became a paralegal in the state of Massachusetts. Vicki joined a work program where she could pull assignments for research and other duties that local law firms needed completed, work on them from home, and turn them in for payment. As long as her work was good and on-time she could keep pulling new assignments. She wanted a job that was interesting enough to hold her attention, but not so restrictive that she couldn’t keep a flexible schedule. So far it had been perfect for her. And, luckily, it allowed her to help Ali and Ashlyn out that Fall when they needed her.

When Ali went back to work full-time they would need to figure out child care, but Ashlyn would be around during her off-season so they weren’t really stressing too much about it. Sydney and Dom used a great childcare center in Lynnfield because the woman who ran it was the sister of one of the teachers that worked with Sydney up in Andover. It was progressive but not too extreme and it was inclusive and diverse. Ashlyn summed it up as she described it to her mother over the phone.

“There are rules and limits and the kids have to follow them but they also encourage exploration and figuring things out on your own and thinking outside the box. It’s a good mix of both worlds.”

The location wasn’t bad for the Dwyers. It was two towns North and East of their house and not really on the way to either Dom’s or Sydney’s job. But it was only a fifteen-minute drive so it was hard to complain. If Ashlyn and Ali wanted to enroll Drew there it was about a twenty-five or thirty-minute drive from the big old house. The good thing was that it was on the way to the office and the stadium and not too far off of the highway. But if they were looking for something close to home, that wasn’t really it. Drew didn’t have to start officially until March but they needed to enroll as soon as they made their decision so there would be a spot for him when the time came. Ali trusted Sydney implicitly when it came to something like this. She wouldn’t bring Cash someplace that wasn’t the best. But Ashlyn wanted to look around and do some more research. Maybe there was a place that was as good, or better, closer to home? The personal connection Sydney had with her teacher friend from work was the deciding factor for the brunette, but she encouraged her wife to do what she needed to do. The deadline to enroll for the Lynnfield place was December 1st so Ashlyn had until then.

The 2019 NWSL season had been one of the best ever. The two new expansion teams from the
year before were both doing ok. The Los Angeles team had taken off like a rocket, benefitting from the MLS team they were sharing space with and also from the complete dearth of professional women’s soccer in their location at the moment. They weren’t showing great results on the table yet, but they had a rabid fanbase which was always a great sign of good things to come on the pitch. Some of the experts felt very strongly that the west coast of California could support at least three or four different NWSL teams. Minnesota was a different story. They had the resources they needed and shared a nice stadium with their MLS brothers, but the crowds were just not coming yet. Minnesota was a hockey crazy state and there was no denying that. The good thing for the NWSL was that their schedule didn’t interfere with ice hockey very much. But everybody pointed out how difficult it had been to get a successful men’s NBA team flourishing in Minnesota. Give the NWSL team some time and everyone was sure it would catch on up there.

The parity in the league was better than ever. Portland and Boston were the two best teams and almost everybody agreed with that. But there were four teams right behind them that just needed some good luck and they could break through and beat either team. Chicago, North Carolina, Seattle and Kansas City were widely regarded as the next level down, but ready to win the championship if the chips fell just right. Houston, Washington, Sky Blue and Orlando were all fighting to try and get up to that next level and some weeks they looked better than the four previous teams. Some weeks they looked worse than LA and Minnesota. The wild card in all of this was the players themselves. As Portland’s stars began to age they started to lose more games. The same would happen to Boston in a couple of years too. It was all about replacing the Whitney Engens and Christine Sinclairs with new, young talent and keeping team chemistry in tact.

This season the Supporters Shield would come down to the very last weekend on the schedule. Boston had been in first place to start the season but then Portland caught up and went ahead after about the halfway mark. But Boston brought a five-game winning streak into the final game as Portland stumbled a bit towards the end. Whoever made the schedule up was a genius because Portland was playing at Boston for the last game of the season and it was Lifetime TV’s game of the week. They were tied with 53 points each and whichever team won the game would win the Supporters Shield and go into the Playoffs as the top-ranked team. None of the next four teams fighting for the last two spots in the playoffs could catch either Boston or Portland so the loser would go into the playoffs in the second spot. If the game ended in a Draw then Portland would win the Supporters Shield based on their head to head match-ups that season. They had played twice already. The first game in July had been a Draw, but the second game in August the Thorns had won. Both teams were playing great soccer and everybody knew the game was going to be epic. There had never been such a vital game to close out a season before.

The Breakers and Lifetime TV promoted the hell out of the game and it was sold out two weeks early. Lifetime TV filmed a special interview with all the UNC alumnae on both teams, together in one big group, and it was one of the most popular segments they had ever done. Part of the incredible appeal was that Heather O’Reilly, who had just retired after the last season, conducted the interview and would also be providing the color commentary during the game for the broadcast. She had played in college with Ashlyn, Whitney, Tobin, Allie Long and Meghan Klingenberg. Some younger players were part of the filming too, but even they knew the real story was these legendary ladies who had won three consecutive national championships at UNC before starting their professional careers. They were legends among the other UNC alumnae, right up there just below Mia Hamm in UNC lore. The interview had been funny and charming and silly and serious at different times. They spent time talking about Tobin winning the prestigious FIFA player of the year award and her long and storied USWNT career. Then they discussed why these two NWSL teams had been so dominant over the past three years. Ashlyn taunted her Thorns friends with playful allegations of stocking their team with foreign bought talent and having the highest payroll, by far, in the league again. Allie Long tried to throw it back on the Breakers club
but Whitney carefully countered each point she tried to make. The Breakers were built from the bottom up and had literally come from the bottom of the table only four years prior. Heather O’Reilly mentioned what Ashlyn and Whitney had discussed the year before, that the Breakers story had a familiar ring to it. It reminded her of their college run. That brought them to the first truly poignant moment. Heather asked the whole group what the similarity was between their college team’s path and the Breakers’ and it was Tobin who pointed the spotlight where it belonged.

“Well, it’s Whit” Tobin said with a shrug as she smiled softly at Whitney Engen. “She led us back then, which was hard to do” she chuckled and grinned at Whitney. “She had a way about her that made the older players respect her and the younger players listen to her too. I think it’s easy to see she’s done the exact same thing here in Boston.”

All of the other players nodded their head in agreement and Ashlyn put her arm around her best friend’s shoulder and squeezed it.

“So, Whit” Heather began, dreading the question she was about to ask, but knowing she had to because it would be the question every single person watching would want the answer to. “Why no call-up for the national team? You win defensive player of the year at least every other year in the NWSL and you’re clearly an incredible leader on and off the pitch. Have you had conversations with the national team coaches over the years about what you need to do to get that call-up?”

“No, not really” the defender replied in a strong and even voice. “You’d have to ask them about it.”

And that was about as feisty as Whitney Elizabeth Engen was going to get on that topic. But it rang loud and clear to everybody who knew her. That was her ‘fuck you’ to the national team coaches who had overlooked her all those years. And now that she had decided to retire after next season, she knew any lingering pipe dreams she had about getting called up were truly dead. So why not give them a little dig?

“Well, we sure could have used you in the World Cup this summer” Tobin replied, her voice just as strong and clear. She wasn’t usually one to get involved in the politics of the team but she was enjoying her new level of celebrity with her FIFA Player of the Year win. The national team lost the final because they couldn’t shut down France’s speedy, lethal attack. Two of their defenders had gone down with injuries during the tournament and they had to play the final game with a young player who was really out of her depth starting at center back. She was abused the entire match. “Probably would have had a different outcome if you’d been there.”

There was a nervous tension that filled the room. Ashlyn knew Kling and Allie weren’t going to say anything to help ease the situation but she didn’t want to either. She wanted this awkward moment to linger so everybody watching could wonder the same fucking thing.

“I think you’re probably right” Heather agreed, herself still apparently a little salty about the way she had been shown the door by the national team coach after the disastrous showing at the 2016 Olympics in Rio. “What do you think Ash?” she turned and tried to rope the keeper into the minefield. “You were part of the coverage and watched all the games this past June...”

Ashlyn was about to pile on and agree, but as she opened her mouth she saw the pained look on Whitney’s face. It was clear to the keeper that she did not want this to be a big thing. Whitney had gotten her little dig in and now she wanted to fade back into the background where she was comfortable.

“I was?” Ashlyn made a funny face and pretended not to remember. “When was it again? For a while there this summer I didn’t even know my own name, forget about anything else” she
laughed.

Thankfully, everybody cracked up with her. Her timing had been perfect and the laugh broke the tension and gave them another topic that they were all very happy to pick up.

“That’s right” Heather laughed, “you had a brand new baby at home in June, didn’t you?”

“I don’t know? Is that what happened?” the blonde chuckled again. “That explains a lot” she rolled her eyes and grinned as they all laughed with her.

They went on to talk about Ashlyn being a new mom and the new challenges that brought. As always, she was quick to give credit where it was due and praised her beautiful wife to the rooftops. The Thorns players talked about meeting him back at their July game in Boston and the subject of Whitney Engen’s snub from the USWNT was officially closed.

The game itself was another classic between those two great teams. It felt like a championship game. The atmosphere was electric and the crowd was insane. To add to the drama, a steady rain fell throughout the entire second half, demanding even more grit and determination from the players on the field. Ashlyn was covered in mud from head to toe as she flung her body around making more than a few dazzling saves. Her backline wasn’t playing poorly, at all. Portland’s attack was just that good. The fans didn’t seem to care about the rain. It had been a very warm day and the rain had been refreshing, apparently. Ashlyn hated playing in the rain, but not because of the rain. It did cut down on her vision a little bit, but the worst part was the mud. Rainy, muddy fields were where tackles got sloppy and spikes lost their grip and where injuries happened. And sure enough, because there always seemed to be some sacrifice required before the soccer gods gave the Breakers anything good, Rose Lavelle went down in a heap when two Portland defenders gang tackled her as she moved towards the box. There were ten minutes left to play and the score was tied at 2-2. The strangled cry that left her body and travelled back to Ashlyn, as she watched helplessly, almost broke her heart.

After the star mid-fielder had been stretchered off the pitch the Breakers survived three powerful attacks and Whitney Engen smartly moved up and intercepted a ball well outside the 18. She looked up and saw Midge Purce, now fully grown into her role as speedy striker in her third year in the league, streaking down the left flank. Whitney launched a beautiful deep ball that caught Purce in stride. The speedster dribbled past a defender as she angled in towards the goal. She looked off the second defender by pretending to line up a pass to Tasha Dowie who was screaming for the ball as she made her far post run. And then Purce planted and delivered a rocket that curled into the top right corner of the goal.

The stadium erupted and the players went crazy as they celebrated with her. Even Rose Lavelle, who had refused to go to the locker room until the game was over, tried to get up and cheer but the trainers made her stay seated with her injured leg immobilized in a temporary air cast. There was still a minute left plus some stoppage time but the Breakers could feel the tide turn in their favor. Ashlyn and Whitney were screaming at their teammates to stay ready and be sharp and get focused. And when the ref blew her whistle four minutes later, the Boston Breakers were victorious! It was a first for the club and it meant a lot to everybody. If they had to choose, they’d all rather win the championship, but winning the Supporters Shield was pretty fucking cool too.

Best record in the league and top of the table. Not too shabby. After all the handshakes and congratulations between the teams and players and coaches, the Breakers went out onto the pitch for the presentation of the Shield. Rose Lavelle was out there too, a pair of crutches added to the air cast and a huge grin on her face. The commissioner of the league made a short speech and praised both teams, touching specifically on the classy rivalry between them and how it had enriched the league as a whole while, at the same time, entertaining everybody smart enough to watch. She
handed the Shield to Whitney who held it high above her head and everybody went nuts again, even in the drizzle that continued to fall.

The team walked around the entire stadium behind their captain as she held up the shield for all the fans to see. Ashlyn and Kristie Mewis carried Rose so she could be with the team in that special moment they wanted to share with all of their supporters who had come and cheered them on all season long. Nobody wanted to think about the fact that no team in the history of the NWSL had won the Supporters Shield and then gone on to win the Championship. That would be a riddle to solve another day. For right now, they were thrilled to be at the top of the table and hosting a playoff game next weekend. If they could win that game they would be going back to defend their championship title. That was the ultimate goal. Oh, it was good to be a Breaker that evening in the rain. Very good indeed.
The first week of October was unseasonably warm. Ashlyn and Ali took Drew to the beach every afternoon or morning, depending on when the keeper had training. They didn’t stay too long, but they all enjoyed it. Drew loved the water. Ashlyn loved that their son seemed to be a natural water baby. And Ali loved that the two people she loved the most were so damned happy while they were at the beach together.

“He’s such a good baby” Ashlyn said as she sat on the edge of the bed next to her wife one night that week.

She had just bathed him, changed him, jammied him, fed him and read to him. In other words, the nighttime routine. It was 8:30pm. Ali didn’t get a nap that afternoon so she had gone to bed early but hadn’t fallen asleep yet. She had called her wife over when she had poked her blonde head inside the door.

“He really is” Ali agreed with a soft smile. “I don’t talk about it much because I don’t want to jinx anything, but he’s kind of perfect.”

“He is” the keeper agreed with a grin that made her dimple appear. “God I love him. Even all his stinky parts.” She shook her head slowly in wonder as she thought about their beautiful baby boy. “I can’t wait to take care of him after the playoffs” she grinned again. “I just feel like I’ll get to know him better, you know?”

“You know him just as well as I do honey” Ali offered as she rolled onto her side and pulled her wife up to sit in the hollow above her knees. “He’s just starting to have a little personality. He hasn’t been awake long enough before now” she giggled.

“I wonder what the next one will be like?” the keeper’s eyes were as big as her smile as she looked off into space, imagining their next baby.

“Are you thinking about that already?” Ali asked, cautiously.

“Oh, um, no not really” the blonde tried to backtrack. “There’s no rush.”

She smiled and looked down at her wife, but Ali’s face had a funny look on it. Ashlyn couldn’t quite make it out. Either she was in a huge amount of trouble or...not. What was going on with the brunette right now?

“It’s ok if you are Ash” she reached out and held her keeper’s hand, rubbing the back of it with her thumb.

“You got me” she admitted and looked sheepishly at her wife. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to put any pressure on it or rush things. I just, I don’t know. I can’t stop thinking about what Drew’s little brother or sister will be like.” She paused and looked at Ali again. She still couldn’t figure out the face she was making, but Ashlyn was pretty sure she wasn’t in trouble. “Like, is he or she going to be just like him? Or maybe the complete opposite. Or maybe they’ll have lots of things in common but still do everything differently...”

“I’ve been wondering that too” Ali said softly, almost in a whisper.

“You have?” The keeper’s face was full of surprise.
“Sure. I mean, who wouldn’t want another baby like ours. He’s the best” the brunette grinned and pulled her wife into a hug.

“Well, wait a minute now” Ashlyn sat back up after the hug, confused. “Are you thinking about having another baby already? Isn’t it way too soon” she looked down at Ali’s mid-section and quirked an eyebrow.

“Not right away, no” Ali chuckled. “But we know we both want to have another one and I’m not getting any younger. I’ll be 36 next year...”

“Which means we have time sweetheart. Don’t get me wrong, I’d love to have another baby with you. Nothing would make me happier. But only if you’re ready, when you’re ready. It just doesn’t seem fair to put your body through that again any time soon. You’re just starting to feel like yourself again.”

The look of concern and devotion on the keeper’s face was enough to make Ali swoon. And she was right. The brunette had been working out and her stomach was almost back to normal again. The only thing that was different to the eye was her breasts, but they wouldn’t get small again until she stopped breastfeeding, which she was planning to do for a year if she could.

“I was thinking, just thinking, that if we had another baby sooner rather than later that it would be better for them, you know, to be close in age.”

“Like you and Kyle, and me and Chris.”

“Yeah, I just think that’s nice. And then, we can be done, or at least done for a while. And I’ll let my body stop being a baby factory for a few years” she giggled.

“So when do you think you’d want to get pregnant again then?” the blonde asked, unable to hide her excitement at the idea. “There’s no wrong answer here Al, it’s whatever you want because you’re the one making the miracle again.”

“I guess if we want to have the baby two years after Drew that would be May or June of 2021. So that would mean...”

“You’d get pregnant in September or October next year. Are you sure that’s not too soon baby?”

“Well, if we want them to be close in age, that’s how it goes, right?”

Ashlyn was fighting back tears as she leaned down to hug her wife again. She held her for a long time, rubbing her back and kissing her neck at the same time.

“I love you so much Ali” she breathed out emotionally, still in the hug. “I just...there’s no way to tell you how much I love you.”

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The other two NWSL playoff teams were determined after the last game of the weekend the next day. Boston would host Chicago and Portland would host Kansas City to see who would get to compete for the championship two weeks after that. Rose Lavelle had a sprained MCL which was so much better than a torn ACL. It would take anywhere from 3-6 weeks to recover so she was out for the first playoff game and probably for the championship game too, if the Breakers made it that far. Nobody was saying it out loud yet, but there was no way anybody was going to push her to play in the championship game and risk her recovery and possibly her future career. She was done for the season, even though it hadn’t been announced that way. It was the worst timing but, they all
knew, it was part of the game. Ashlyn made a point of pulling the young and talented midfielder aside that Thursday night at team dinner to try and talk with her about the injury. She told Rose her own story of overcoming injury after injury after injury. The keeper didn’t pull any punches or sugarcoat anything. But she also made sure Rose knew how much she believed in her and her ability to come back from her injury. A sprained MCL was a walk in the park compared to a torn ACL but Ashlyn wasn’t trying to one up her situation. She just wanted to make sure her teammate got some cold hard facts and then lots of love and support.

Team dinners had been different that year and nobody had been happy about it at first. They were at the big old house for the first two months of the season, but once Ali had the baby they had moved team dinner to Kristie Mewis’ apartment in Boston. She lived with her fiancé, who, oddly enough, was a finance guy who used to play lacrosse in college. Nobody that knew Kristie thought she would end up with a guy who wore a suit and carried a briefcase to work. Athletes tended to be a superstitious bunch and the team was afraid the change to their team dinner routine would ruin their season and cause any number of calamitous things to happen to them all. Luckily, they played better than ever and finished the season atop the table so they could put that whole team dinner location drama to bed once and for all. Tempting fate even further, the team voted to have the last team dinner of the year at Ashlyn’s house that week. Ali had told Ashlyn and Whitney it would be fine to start having the dinners at the house back in September. But the two best friends held off, and now they were glad they had waited. It would be a nice change and it was such a beautiful, warm week they planned to hit the beach after training that afternoon. It was a wonderful team dinner, everybody felt good being back at the big old house again.

Poor Chicago. They played their hearts out every year and made it to the playoffs every year and just couldn’t get past the Breakers. 2019 was no different for them and after the final whistle blew Christen Press made her way to Ashlyn who had again proven to be the bane of her existence. They hugged and then talked seriously for several minutes, facing each other with their arms out in front of them on each other’s shoulders, and their heads bowed together at the forehead. The forward told the keeper what a great game she had played and how sick and tired she was of losing a playoff game to her every damned year. Ashlyn told Christen that she had always brought out the keeper’s very best game and that she had never faced a better striker. All sorts of cameras documented the emotional exchange and it became a meme pretty quickly after the game. It was a ‘caption this’ meme and most of them were pretty damned funny. But some of them were mean and ugly and even lurid. Later that night Ashlyn and Christen both posted the same version of it. They had succinctly summarized the actual conversation they had with Christen saying ‘Damn I’m sick of losing dis game!’ and Ashlyn replying ‘You da best Pressy’. They both used #datruth #muchrespect #strongertogether in hopes of putting the whole thing to bed.

Portland barely beat a feisty FC Kansas City team in the second playoff game to secure a rematch for the championship game to be held in two weeks. In Portland’s own stadium. Championship Week kicked off with the runner up game between Chicago and Kansas City on Saturday October 12th. Kansas City was expected to win after playing so well against Portland, but Christen Press scored a hat trick and led her team to third place in the league for the fourth time in five years.

Back at the big old house everybody was getting ready for a big and busy month. The Championship Game was the following Saturday, October 19th, which was also Ashlyn’s 34th birthday. The big dilemma was whether or not Ali could go to Portland for the week with Drew or not. She wanted to go, it was, arguably, the most important week in the league and everybody went to Championship Week. But she didn’t feel right dragging her not quite five month old baby across the country and living out of a hotel room to make it happen. Tammye had used up all of her vacation time during her June visit so she and Carol were only coming for the weekend, just like Deb and Ken and Vicki. After much debate, they decided that Ali would bring Drew for the weekend and fly out with Ken and Vicki Friday morning. They left the dogs with Sydney and Dom
and Ali promised to find a way to make it up to her best friend. The other agents from Knight-Harris who covered NWSL players, Jen and Paige, would be there to represent the company and help their athletes who were playing in the game with anything they needed that week.

The other big event was Whitney and Ryan’s wedding. It was the Saturday after the Championship game so there was no time to waste. The week after they beat Chicago had been full of the bride- and groom-to-be making packing lists and finalizing plans and coordinating deliveries and payments. As excited as the defender was to get married, she really didn’t want to think about anything that week except how to beat Portland. But she was a smart and practical woman so she knew she had to spend some time on wedding stuff that week so that the week after the championship game would be survivable. Ryan flew to Portland on Monday afternoon with the team and got his own room in the same hotel so he could help Whitney with anything she needed that week. She hated to ask for help almost as much as Ali and Ashlyn did but he knew she would need it at some point that week.

It was odd that week. Ashlyn felt weird being at Championship Week without the brunette there providing a safe room for peace and quiet and the occasional dirty massage. The keeper realized that she had taken that for granted in the years past and put a reminder in her phone to thank her wife for making those weeks so much better than they would otherwise have been. Jen and Paige checked in on her as they did with all of the players, but the keeper didn’t need anything special. She fulfilled her media obligations like the professional that she was and did the promo shots that Lifetime TV wanted of the five UNC teammates that were going to replay the game from the end of the season. She did everything she was supposed to do. She also missed her wife and son more than she thought was possible. They had been separated many times before so Ashlyn was a little surprised at the depth of her longing those 3-1/2 days. That’s all it was, 3-1/2 days, but it felt so much longer. She thought it was because she and Ali had been connecting a lot more and, of course, the talk about having another baby had brought their relationship to a whole other level of commitment. The keeper couldn’t wait for her family to arrive Friday morning.

And Ali felt just as strange not being there with her girl. She was supposed to be there to support her, both as her wife and as her agent and she regretted not finding a way to make it work. But then she looked at Drew and knew they had made the right decision. She talked with Ashlyn every day on the phone and could tell she was out of sorts. She tried to talk her through it but the keeper just kept saying she was fine. Friday couldn’t come soon enough for either of them. As Ali carried Drew and her purse and the diaper bag off of the plane she breathed a sigh of relief. Flying all the way across the country with a five-month old was no joke. She would definitely need to find a way to thank Ken and Vicki for all their help. There was no way she could have done that on her own. Their little group headed down to the luggage carousel and Ali brought Drew and the diaper bag into the tiny nursing lounge near the bathrooms so she could feed him. She fed him once on the plane, sitting in the window seat to get a little bit of privacy, but it was a 6-1/2 hour direct flight and he was hungry again. She closed and locked the door behind her and sat down on the little padded bench with a sigh. Just as the baby latched on there was a knock on the door.

“Someone’s in here” she answered the knock. It was a solo room, which was pretty dumb the more she thought about it, and it wasn’t big enough to share with another nursing mom even if she had wanted to be nice about it. The room was roughly the size off a large handicap accessible bathroom stall with a bench and an electrical outlet and a table that folded down if you wanted it to.

“Sorry.”

“Al, it’s me, can I come in?”

“Ashlyn?”
“Please let me in baby.” Her voice sounded desperate.

Ali stood up and unlocked the door, her heart pounding at the early appearance of her beautiful wife. The blonde squeezed her way into the small room and shut and locked the door again. She turned and hugged her wife and nursing boy, pressing kisses into the side of Ali’s head and, finally, her lips.

“What are you doing here?” Ali asked excitedly as she sat back down on the bench and made room for her wife to sit next to her. “I didn’t think I’d get to see you until later this afternoon.”

“Coach let me take one of the team vans to come and pick you guys up. We finished our morning training and he let me miss lunch as long as I’m back and ready to go for the film session at 1:30pm.” She was talking fast and she was almost jittery. “I don’t know, I think maybe he could tell I was having a hard time this week” she said with a big grin that contradicted the words she had just said.

“I knew you were having trouble” Ali turned her body sideways and put her legs on top of her keeper’s lap, trying to get as close as possible. Ashlyn immediately hugged her closer, making sure not to squish poor, hungry Drew who was oblivious to everything except his meal. “You should have talked to me about it honey. It might have made you feel better.”

“God, I’m so glad you’re here” Ashlyn squeaked out and started to cry. “I’m sorry I’m crying while you’re trying to feed him, I just...I don’t know what’s going on with me. I missed you both so much.”

Ali tried to hold her wife’s head as best she could and Ashlyn finally just leaned her head down on the brunette’s shoulder as she tried to slow her tears and her breathing down. There was another knock on the door a few minutes later.

“Someone’s in here” Ali said again.

“Alex?” her father’s voice sounded through the door.

“Hi Dad. I’ll be out as soon as I can...”

“No, I just wanted to tell you to take your time. Ashlyn’s picking us up so just do what you need to do princess.”

“I found her Ken” Ashlyn chuckled. “We’d let you in but it’s really tight in here.”

“Oh good” he said, sounding relieved. “I wasn’t sure how many of these there were in the airport. We’ll wait for the luggage and see you when you’re done.”

“Thanks Dad.”

Ashlyn looked up sheepishly at her wife after a few minutes.

“I found them first and they told me where you went. I just had to see you right away. I feel kind of dumb now.” She lowered her eyes and sniffled.

“Ashlyn, honey, I’m glad you came to find me. I’ve been missing you like crazy this week too. I’m not sure what’s going on with us” she chuckled, “but it’s not just you.”

The keeper leaned forward and brought their lips together in a slow, meaningful kiss, catching the brunette by surprise at first.
“I might need one of your special massages later this afternoon” she wagged her eyebrows and smirked.

Ali gave her a tender kiss and wiped the tears off of her face with her thumb.

“Well I’m sharing a room with my mom so I’m not sure that will work” she gave the blonde another sweet kiss. “But she’s not getting in until dinner time I think. I don’t know, we’ll figure something out. Because that sounds really good to me” she kissed her again and then pulled back so she could burp Drew. “Look who’s here sweet boy, it’s Mama.”

Drew smiled at Ashlyn as Ali patted his back while sitting him facing forward on her lap. Ashlyn held his little fingers and rubbed his tummy a bit which usually helped him burp, or giggle. Sometimes the giggle made him burp too. After another minute he burped and then happily settled in for breast number two. Ali smiled at her wife and Ashlyn beamed back at her. It was the first time all week that she felt right and she knew it was because Ali and Drew were there with her. She had no doubt about it. She didn’t understand it yet, but she didn’t care so much about that just then. She had her family in her arms and, even though they were jammed into a tiny little room, she couldn’t have been happier.

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“So how did it go?” Ali asked carefully as she greeted Tammye at the Portland airport later that afternoon with a hug.

“Oh, you know Mike, we chatted for hours non-stop and now everything’s perfect” she rolled her eyes and chuckled as she watched her daughter-in-law hug Carol.

“Yikes” the brunette replied with a grimace. “How bad was it? And where is he now?”

“Men’s room” Carol offered with a playful smirk.

“We need to talk some more but I think we’ll be ok.” Tammye looked sad for a minute until she looked up at her girlfriend and started to smile.

The issue of Mike Harris having trouble accepting the fact that his ex-wife was now dating and living with a woman had yet to be resolved. Nobody really knew what to do about it and Mike didn’t seem willing to or capable of working it out on his own. Kyle had tried talking with him about it over the phone, using their bond of sobriety as a basis for trust and, everybody hoped, acceptance. But even he couldn’t get through to the taciturn and lonely man. The temporary, although almost year-long, solution had been for Mike to just avoid the situation as often as possible. He spent a lot of time with Chris, Beth and Johnny so when Tammye and Carol would come visit he could just disappear and nobody would feel like he was missing. The only people he wasn’t spending time with were Tammye and Carol. But as the Harrises celebrated the different milestones, especially in young Johnny’s life, that plan began to fall apart.

When Ali called Tammye in September to talk about surprising Ashlyn for her birthday by flying Mike up to Portland for, at the time what they hoped would be, the championship game, the older woman had seemed hesitant about it. Which is exactly why the brunette had called her. If the Harrises were going to get past this they clearly needed a little shove and Ali was more than happy to do the pushing. But she had to make sure Tammye was on board first, and willing to help. During the month of September she had spoken with her ex-husband three or four different times about the issue. He hung up on her the first time she broached the subject of her new romance. But they made it a little bit farther each time they spoke. Finally, the week before the flight, Tammye was direct with him and told him about the surprise birthday present Ali had arranged and
explained that it was time for him to man up and fly to Portland with she and Carol for the weekend. Logistically, it was so much easier for them to fly together and that’s how Ali had arranged it. He had a seat on their flights, but not with them. She would let Tammye decide if they wanted to select different seats when the time came. And Mike wasn’t an idiot. He probably could have flown on his own flight. But of everybody in the entire extended family, he was the last person anyone really wanted negotiating an airport by himself. He was the one people worried about. He just wasn’t a worldly guy. He lived in the same place he had always lived and had no desire to explore anyplace else. When he had travelled previously, he had always had somebody with him like Gram or Tammye or one of his grown kids.

“There she is” Mike said with a big grin as he walked towards the three women. It appeared that he was at least going to put on a good front for the weekend, even if he was still uncomfortable. He wrapped Ali up in a big hug and lifted her off the ground a little bit, just like Chris and Ashlyn often did. The brunette would always love seeing that lone Harris dimple they all shared. “I can’t thank you enough for doing this Ali. Really, it means so much.” He looked around as they separated. “Where’s my grandson? I can’t wait another minute to meet him.”

“Oh, sorry Mike” the brunette replied as they all started to walk towards the exit. “This was just a really quick airport trip so Ashlyn doesn’t look for me and get suspicious. And ‘quick’ and ‘the baby’ don’t go in the same sentence” she chuckled. “He’s at the hotel with my dad right now. But we’ll go get you guys checked in and you can meet him right away.”

They made it all the way back to the lobby of the hotel before the gig was up. Ashlyn just happened to be walking through the lobby after the team’s film study session, on her way back upstairs. She had been texting her wife trying to find out if they were on for their massage session or not. When she heard Ali’s laugh fill the lobby she snapped her head up and followed one of her absolute favorite sounds until she saw her beautiful brunette at the lobby desk, laughing with her mother and Carol. It took her a minute to see the man standing just to the side of them and she felt her throat tighten as her emotions rose up again. She ran across the lobby and practically tackled her father to the ground in greeting. Only the lobby desk stopped the duo from falling to the floor.

“The baby!” Mike laughed as he got his footing and turned to share her hug. “I love you girl but try not to kill your old man, ok?” he laughed some more.

The hug lasted a long time as the women finished checking in. Ali stood there with Mike’s room key and realized that her wife was crying and that’s why the hug was taking so long. She turned back to Tammye and Carol to give father and daughter a minute together. She texted her dad to find out where Drew was so Ashlyn could introduce him to Mike as soon as possible. A fresh wave of hotel guests trying to check in nudged the keeper out of her tearful hug. She pulled back and looked down sheepishly as she wiped her eyes.

“God, sorry Pop, I...I’m just so glad you’re here” she admitted with a small smile. “What a great surprise.”

“Oh, you weren’t supposed to find out like this” Ali explained as they all walked towards the elevators. “We were supposed to be upstairs waiting for you but traffic out of the airport was a little tough.”

“Pop! You’re here!!”

“Jesus Bash” Mike laughed as he got his footing and turned to share her hug. “I love you girl but try not to kill your old man, ok??” he laughed some more.

She let go of her father and wrapped her arms around Ali from behind and picked her up, kissing her neck at the same time. The brunette squealed in surprise and then nuzzled her head against her
keeper’s for a few seconds.

“And you two were accomplices!” Ashlyn playfully accused Tammye and Carol as she put her wife back down and moved to officially and properly greet them. “Thank you guys so much for being here this weekend. I’m so happy to see you all.”

Ashlyn went back and put her arm around her father as they rode the elevator up to their rooms. She understood in an instant what a big deal it had been for him to fly all the way to Portland with Tammye and Carol and she could not have been more appreciative. Yes, she thought his discomfort with the situation was stupid, in general, but it was real for him and she had to respect that. Carol and Tammye got off the elevator two floors below the rooms that Ali and Deb would share and where Mike’s room was. Ken and Vicki were one floor above them and the team rooms were all down a little lower.

“We’ll just get settled and be right up” Tammye said as they stepped off the elevator. “I can’t wait to get my hands on my grandson” she smiled broadly and her whole face lit up.

“Oh my God, Pop” Ashlyn said with her eyes wide after the elevator started moving again. “You can meet Drew!”

“That’s the plan” he chuckled and let his emotional daughter hug him again.

Ali cocked her head and looked adoringly at her wife’s face over Mike’s shoulder. She had never seen her so out of sorts about a game like this before. Sure, Ashlyn had been stressed or nervous or jittery and full of extra energy before big games before. But not this raw and emotional. This was new.

“How long do you have?” the brunette asked as they stepped off the elevator.

“We have to be back for team dinner at 5pm, but then we’re off after that until curfew. Coach knows a lot of us have family here tonight. I think he’s starting to get soft” she chuckled.

What the players didn’t know, not even team captain Whitney Engen, was that the coach and staff had invited everyone to the team dinner that night. Anybody who had family there was invited. The team’s ticket and travel coordinator knew who was coming because she had made sure they had tickets for the game the next afternoon. The coach was known for being a fairly brusque Brit who didn’t have a lot of time for the touchy-feely parts of the job. He would always listen to any player that wanted to talk with him, but then he would also always talk. Sometimes the talk was tough love and not every player responded well to it. So they all knew that if they asked to talk to the coach they had to be ready for a heavy dose of reality in exchange. It wasn’t a bad thing. Some players appreciated that he was all business most of the time. They didn’t necessarily need or want to be his friend. He had softened over the five years he had been with the team, especially once he knew he could trust the leaders of the group to keep things running smoothly.

“Good, Mike can bring his stuff to his room and then come over to mine, I’m in 1105” Ali instructed. “Dad and Vicki are bringing the baby down at 3pm so you’ve got about fifteen minutes.”

Ali kissed her wife’s lips and then started down the hall in the other direction towards her room, while the keeper walked her father to his room. When the brunette pushed the door to her room open and stepped inside she quickly surveyed the mess and decided it wasn’t too bad. She had only been in there for a couple of hours before she went to the airport though. Man, travelling with babies was fucking exhausting. And it was already almost 6pm at home and Drew would be getting fussy, as he always did just before bathtime and bedtime routines. Oh well, she would just
have to do the best she could. If his sleep schedule that they had worked so hard to establish got fucked up this weekend, then they would just have to start over again when they got home on Sunday night. She was pulled out of her worries by her wife, who slipped in the door just before it closed and locked.

“Hi beautiful” she purred as she pressed herself up against Ali from behind, wrapping her arms around her and running her hands all over her stomach, hips, crotch and thighs.

“Jesus!” the brunette yelped from her spot in the middle of the room. “You scared the shit out of me! What the hell?” her fear-induced anger dissipated as soon as she felt Ashlyn’s hot mouth on her neck. The adrenaline from the shock quickly turned into other sensations as the blonde’s long fingers explored her body. “Damn babe” she moaned.

Ashlyn turned her around by her hips and crashed their lips together in a passionate kiss, both of them groping each other’s back and ass with eager hands. They kissed like that for about five minutes and then the keeper started to grind against Ali’s strong thigh as things intensified. The brunette felt her body respond as her panties got soaked and her face and neck got flushed. It took every ounce of willpower she had to pull her head back and break the kiss.

“Ash” she gasped out, panting. “We can’t. They’ll all be here in a few minutes.”

“We won’t let them in” Ashlyn replied, her own breathing ragged with lust, as she leaned her forehead against her wife’s and kept grinding.

“Dad has a key” the brunette breathed out. “In case they needed anything for the baby.”

They heard voices in the hall and kissed one more time as they stilled everything else that had been in motion.

“Fuck, I want you” Ashlyn’s voice was low and urgent.

“Get Whit to give you the room for an hour tonight” Ali panted out and tried to straighten up and make her limbs let go of her sexy keeper. “Just before curfew...”

“Yeah, she can go to Ryan’s room or something” Ashlyn agreed as she dropped to her knees and pressed her face between Ali’s legs. “God, you smell so fucking good baby...”

“Stop babe, come on” Ali whined, but was unable to move away from the woman she loved.

There was a beep at the door as a key card was swiped and then the handle turned. Ali leapt backwards and stepped into the bathroom to try and compose herself, leaving Ashlyn on her knees in the middle of the room, with her back to the door. She lowered herself all the way to the floor with a groan and tried to steady her breathing and get the scent of her wife’s passion out of her head.

“Hellooo” Vicki sing-songed as Ken held the door open for her and baby Drew. “Oh, are you ok Ashlyn?”

“Hi guys” the blonde answered, face still against the carpet as she stuck her arm up and waved. “Yep, just stretching some things out” she groaned as she twisted her upper body from her hips and reached behind her.

“There he is” Ali cooed as she came out of the bathroom with a smile. “How was he? This is his fussy time back at home so...”
“He was good” Ken answered as he put the diaper bag on the floor by the tv and set the baby carrier on the desk. “Everything good in here?”

“Yep, everything’s good” she said as she picked Drew up. “Hi sweet boy. We’ve got someone for you to meet. Yes we do” she gave him a loud kiss that made him giggle. “Are you ready to meet your Papa?”

Ashlyn rolled onto her back, but stayed on the floor, fighting for control. Ali turned around and put their son on top of her belly with a smirk.

“Well you may as well do some tummy time with him while you’re down there” she giggled and squeezed her wife’s arm as she stood back up and started tidying the room.

“Hi buddy” Ashlyn craned her neck forward to kiss his head as he lay on her stomach and chest. “How’s my best boy?”
The rest of the afternoon and evening were really wonderful, despite Drew’s crankiness. But nobody could blame him, his body was telling him he should be asleep by now. Deb arrived and joined the group just as Ashlyn had to go down to team dinner. She took a quick turn loving up on her grandson before returning him to Mike’s arms. The elder Harris was pretty good with babies now, although Drew was a lot smaller than the two-year old Johnny he was used to. The extra time he was spending with Chris and Beth at the flower shop and at their house involved lots of time with his first born grandson and everybody was happy with that development. He had wept when he held Drew the first time that afternoon and had been allowed to hold him almost the whole two hours the family spent together in Ali’s room. Ashlyn placed the baby gently in his arms.

“Hey sweet boy, this is your Papa. He’s my dad and he’s a pretty cool guy. I think you’re really going to like hanging out with him.” She grinned as she stood next to her father and watched his emotions overtake him. Her own eyes filled with tears, but they were all happy and full of love, just like her father’s were. Drew reached a fussy arm out and swatted himself with it as he jerked it up and down. “Easy buddy” Ashlyn cooed as she touched his cheek with her finger to try and soothe him.

They decided to keep him on his own schedule as much as possible so they took him into the bathroom to give him a sponge bath and get him ready for bed. They let Mike hold him while Ali and Ashlyn both used warm wet washcloths on his wriggly and wrinkly little body. Mike did a surprisingly good job holding the squirming baby, but Ashlyn stood by ready to jump in if he had any trouble. Drew loved bath time because he loved the water so he cheered right up and started giggling and flailing around in pure happiness. Deb and Tammye watched the cute show from the door to the bathroom and clucked approvingly.

“I know he’s a Krieger and all” Mike said when they were almost done with the bath. “But he’s got a lot of Harris in him. The blue eyes and the water...”

It sounded like a stupid thing to say because everybody knew there was absolutely no way any of Ashlyn’s DNA had been involved in his conception. But Mike wasn’t wrong either.

“Thank you Mike” Ali said with a smile. “I say that all the time.”

“Yeah, but the chances his eyes stay blue are so small, right?” the keeper asked the room, hoping for some support.

“Well, they’re not coming from our side of the family” Deb chuckled. “Mine are brown and Ken’s are brown so no blue from Alex.”

“Oh yeah, it’s the recessive gene thing. Even though my eyes are brown if either of my parents had blue eyes then there’s a chance my baby will have blue eyes” Ali nodded as some of her research from before they got pregnant came back to her.

“So if the donor, who had hazel eyes, had parents with blue eyes then his could stay blue” Ashlyn poked Drew in his belly as she spoke.

“I guess we’ll just have to wait and see” Tammye smiled at the happy scene in the bathroom.

The team dinner surprise from coach was revolutionary. The players were so excited when they walked into the large function room where their families were seated and waiting for them. Coach
told them they had to have dinner in the bigger room that night because of some hotel glitch and to just keep quiet about it. Then he rushed them through the double doors to the room as quickly as possible so they could all get the surprise at the same time.

“You’re not getting soft on us now coach, are you?” Whitney asked him as she and Ashlyn hung back to let the other players go in first.

“Nah, that’s impossible Whit. He’d have to have a heart to go soft. We all know he doesn’t have one of those” the keeper grinned.

Whitney called everybody to attention shortly after they had settled down and gotten over the shock. She made a big deal out of thanking the coach for the awesome gift he had given them that night. She didn’t take a lot of time, but she very clearly warned everybody not to make him regret doing it. They all knew she was right and each player went over to the coach at some point during the meal and thanked him and told him they wouldn’t let him down the next day. Whitney hadn’t told them to do that, but after watching Kristie, Tasha, Angela and Julie start doing it, the other players quickly caught on. Even Rose Lavelle hobbled over to him on her crutches. The captain sat with her parents and Ryan next to Ashlyn’s family and surged with pride. Man she loved this team.

Deb let herself into the room she was sharing with her daughter an hour after dinner started and found her lying on her side, sleeping on the bed. Her hand was still on Drew’s belly in his portable carrier on the floor next to the bed, he was fast asleep too.

“Alex...” she whispered and gently woke the sleeping beauty up. “Why don’t you go down and eat. I’ll stay with him for a while.”

“Thanks mom” she kissed Deb’s cheek thirty minutes later after changing and getting cleaned up a little. “I’ll be back in about an hour. Love you.”

The grandparents brigade was already in motion, Ali and Ashlyn just hadn’t been told about it yet. They had already worked out a schedule for the evening so Ali could be there for Ashlyn to help settle her nerves. They could all see how unusually worked up the blonde was that day. Tammye and Carol came up to take the next shift so Deb could go down and join the fun as the family hung out in the big room the team had arranged for the whole night. There was a movie playing on a big screen on one side of the room and there was an area on the other side of the room with board games and card games and other activities for the families to enjoy together as they focused on helping the players relax. Ashlyn and Julie King dominated an indoor carpet bowling game that ran along the length of the room at the back. It was silly, simple things like those that kept everybody loose for the next four hours until curfew at 10pm.

There was a table set up with snacks and beverages and Whitney had arranged a birthday cake for Ashlyn to be brought in around 8pm. Everybody sang happy birthday to her and she cried again as she thanked the team, the coaches, the staff and her family for another awesome year together. It was just before 9pm when the keeper quietly said goodnight to her family and nodded a thank you towards Whitney. She took her wife by the hand and they walked out of the room arm in arm with Ali leaning her head against Ashlyn’s shoulder. They spent the whole ride up to the room in silence, just standing close and caressing each other with simple touches until the elevator doors opened on Ashlyn’s floor. Ali really wanted to know what was going on with her girl but knew this wasn’t the time for conversation. Maybe after they spent some time loving each other they could talk. Or maybe not.

At 9:45pm Ali sat up and started to get dressed, reaching for her panties and nursing bra that were at the foot of the bed. She tossed Ashlyn her t-shirt while she was down there and took one last look at her beautiful keeper before she pulled it over her head. The brunette sighed. She knew
Ashlyn’s playing days would be coming to an end sooner rather than later, and she didn’t really want to see that day happen. But, at times like this, she wouldn’t miss the constant leaving they were always doing to each other.

“That’s new” Ashlyn reached over to touch the smooth fabric of the new, light blue nursing bra her wife was putting on. “It’s pretty, I like it.” She kissed Ali’s shoulder and rubbed her lower back as she sat up next to her in the bed. “Not as pretty as you though.”

“It was new when you took it off me forty-five minutes ago too hot shot” Ali teased and then turned for a quick kiss. “Thank you honey. You always make me feel good.”

“Well there’s plenty more where that came from” the blonde wagged her eyebrows at her wife and lowered her hand down to the top of Ali’s ass.

“Ha ha, very funny” the brunette chuckled. “You know what I mean. And stop that or we’ll horrify Whitney when she comes through that door in a few minutes.”

They begrudgingly finished getting dressed and leaned back against the headboard together for the last five minutes they had left. Ashlyn had turned the tv on and found a soccer game. She turned the volume way down.

“Ash, are you ok honey?” Ali’s voice was soft and tender as she pressed a sweet kiss into her keeper’s cheek. “You’ve been really...”

“Crazy today?” the blonde finished her sentence for her with a chuckle.

“Well, I wasn’t going to say crazy, but you’re definitely off a little bit. Do you know what’s going on?”

Ali held her wife’s hand in both of hers and delicately rubbed her long fingers and massaged her hand and forearm as they sat there.

“I’m not really sure” the keeper sighed. “All I know is as soon as I saw you at the airport I could breathe again. I know that sounds dramatic” she rolled her eyes at herself. “But that’s what it felt like to me.”

“It does sound dramatic” Ali giggled and kissed her hand. “But I know what you mean. This week was so hard to be away from you. I felt terrible every day because I wasn’t here with you. And I think it’s partly because you’ve been home for three whole weeks, starting with your week off. And we got to spend a lot of time together and...”

“And we’ve been getting closer again as our schedule starts to get back to normal” Ashlyn offered as she nodded her head. “That makes sense.”

“Do you think that’s what’s bothering you? I mean, besides the fact that you’ve got a huge championship game to play tomorrow in a big stadium on your opposing team’s home pitch. Not that any of that should get to you at all” she rolled her eyes playfully and smiled at her beautiful wife.

Ashlyn laughed and pulled her in for a soft, slow kiss, cupping her face with her free hand and moving it down her neck to her shoulder as they kissed.

“Yeah, I really do think that’s what it was. I just missed you and Drew. As silly as that sounds. It’s sort of embarrassing that I let it get to me like that. Oh well. You’re here now and I’m happier than I’ve been all week. Thank you so much for making the trip. I know it couldn’t have been easy on
the plane. How did all of that go?”

They spent a few minutes talking about breastfeeding on the plane and how helpful Vicki and Ken both were all day long. Then they talked about how cute all the grandparents were with Drew before dinner. And then Whitney knocked softly and opened the door, just one minute before 10 pm. She seemed surprised to see them sitting up and talking as they both greeted her.

“Everything ok?” the defender asked, knowing her best friend had been increasingly on edge for the past four days.

“All good Whit” Ashlyn grinned at her. “Everybody where they’re supposed to be? Do you need me to go do a lap and check on anything?”

“No, I just did one. I think everybody’s in their rooms. You can start the group picture chain, just make sure your wife’s not in ours” she chuckled as she walked over towards the couple and sat on the edge of her own bed.

Ali kissed her wife one more time and then stood up.

“I’ve gotta go anyway. I don’t want Dad and Vicki to have to deal with the baby when he wakes up hungry, cranky and confused. Happy Birthday in two hours honey. Sleep well ladies.”

Ashlyn moved over to the side of the bed closest to Whitney’s and took a picture of both of them in or on their beds. She sent it in a group text to the other players on the team. Everybody was supposed to reply with their own picture so they were all accountable for each other at curfew. Whitney got up to go into the bathroom as Ali stopped at Ashlyn’s messenger bag on her way towards the door.

“Here’s your key to my room babe. I got four of them just in case. This way you can come see us whenever you want. Just, you know, try not to walk in on my mom naked” Ali winked, blew her a kiss and left the room.

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Saturday started out pretty great for the birthday girl. She woke up to some very sweet texts from her wife, one of which was decidedly more dirty than sweet and even included a sexy picture which was rare for the brunette. At team breakfast, the two rookies on the team waited on her hand and foot as was the team’s standing hazing ritual. Rookies had to wait on a teammate who was having a birthday. No exceptions. The last team meeting of the day was short but impactful as they reviewed strategy and reinforced their keys to the game. Then there were two hours of free time before team lunch which was the last thing they would do before heading over to the stadium to get ready for the 3pm kick-off. Lifetime TV was airing the game live at 6pm instead of 3pm because of the time change. They didn’t want to make the players play at 12pm when so many of them weren’t used to doing that.

Ashlyn went up to Ali’s room during their two-hour break before lunch and smiled down at the bed with both of her napping loves. Deb was on her bed, reading a newspaper and watching golf on the tv, her husband’s influence easy to see in her viewing choices. The keeper sat next to her mother-in-law and picked up part of the paper she had already finished. They talked quietly for a few minutes and Ashlyn let her explain which golfers were going to have a good tournament that weekend and which were already floundering. Ashlyn hadn’t spoken to Deb about the changes she and Mike had been going through in their marriage, but she knew from Ali that they were working them out and were doing well. She talked about planning another boating trip in Miami so Mike could teach her some more fishing tricks.
“She’ll be mad when she finds out you were here and didn’t wake her up” Deb warned, knowingly.

“I know” the blonde sighed. “But I just can’t. She texted me and said he wouldn’t go back to sleep after she fed him last night. She must be exhausted.”

“Yeah, poor little guy’s just confused” Deb smiled as she looked over at the sleeping pair. Ali was on her side in the middle of the bed, facing Deb’s bed, and Drew was asleep in front of her. “I think she’s doing the right thing though. The trip is so short it’s not worth messing up his whole schedule. It’ll be tough while we’re here, but when you get home you’ll all be grateful you stuck to it.”

“Does it ever go away?” Ashlyn asked softly as she looked at her sleeping family on the other bed. “That feeling where your heart just swells up so big that you think it will just explode right out of your chest?”

Deb patted her leg and smiled at her. “No. Not one bit.”

“I had no idea I could love her any more than I already did” the keeper continued after a minute. “But then I watched her go through the pregnancy and the delivery. I swear Deb. I would do anything that woman asks me to do for the rest of my life and it would still never be enough to make up for what she’s given me.”

“Ashlyn, you’re going to make me cry” Deb dabbed at her eyes. “What’s got you so emotional these days? Alex says you were like this yesterday too. Is everything ok honey?”

“I’m good, I promise” she smiled bashfully at her mother-in-law. “I don’t know, maybe it’s a delayed reaction to having the baby or something. Maybe it’s PMS. I have no idea” she chuckled.

“Have you thought about getting pregnant? If you don’t mind me asking” she added quickly.

“Of course I don’t mind” she nudged Deb with her elbow. “I’ve changed my mind back and forth about being pregnant my whole life. I didn’t think it was possible when I was younger, just because I knew I didn’t want to get married.”

Deb shot a look at her and quirked an eyebrow.

“No, I mean, married to a man” she chuckled softly. “As things changed and lesbians started getting married and raising families I thought it was awesome and I knew I wanted to have kids someday, but didn’t think it would be me that would carry them. I’m not sure why. I guess it’s the same old tomboy thing. But when I met Meg and started to be a parent to her it all changed for me. She unlocked the maternal side of me and I could see myself getting pregnant. And then hearing about Syd’s tough time and watching Ali go through it – and hers was a pretty text-book pregnancy and I still think it was brutal for her – made me sort of back off of it a little bit.”

“Why?”

“Fear, plain and simple. I can’t think of anything harder there is to do in the whole world than carry and deliver a baby” she shook her head solemnly as she thought about the pregnant women in her life. “It still amazes me.”

“Every pregnant woman is scared” Deb said quietly. “But our bodies were built to do it and you just have to have a little faith.”

“Well holding Drew in my arms was enough to make me want to do it again, get pregnant I mean.”
“So you do want to carry a baby?”

“Yeah, I do. I’m hoping I’ll be able to when I’m done playing.”

“Oh that’s wonderful Ashlyn” Deb gave her a side hug. “It’s an unbelievable experience. I hope it works out for you honey.”

“Did I just hear you say you’re retiring so you can have our next baby?” Ali’s rough, sleepy voice came from the other bed.

Ashlyn leaned forward, past Deb, to look at her wife’s face. Her eyes were still closed and she hadn’t moved a muscle but there was a small smile on her pretty face.

“Nope. Sorry baby. Must have been a dream” she grinned at Ali as she finally opened her eyes.

“Come over here and snuggle with us” she patted the bed behind her. “How long have you been here and why didn’t you wake me up.”

Deb chuckled as the keeper got up and went to the other bed, carefully spooning her wife from behind without disturbing the still sleeping baby.

“About a half an hour. And because you need your sleep.” Ashlyn kissed Ali’s cheek as she propped her head up in her hand. “Go back to sleep, princess.”

“I’ve got to get him up soon anyway. How much longer mom?”

“Fifteen minutes” Deb replied after looking at her watch. “But I can feed him if you two want to go spend some time together.”

“I was hoping I could bring him down to lunch a little early” Ashlyn said softly, still trying not to wake him up. “A lot of the girls were bummed they didn’t see him last night and they really want to spend some time with him.”

“That should be fine” Ali yawned and rolled over a bit so she was leaning on her wife. She turned her head and pursed her lips, asking for and receiving a kiss. “When is that?”

“I’ll text them now. Lunch is at 12pm so if we can get down there at 11:30 that would be great.”

“Ok. I’m going to take a shower. If he wakes up before I’m out please feed him and then I’ll have to pump, otherwise I’ll feed him when I’m done.”

There was a knock on the door as Ali went into the bathroom. Deb got up and let Mike into the room with a smile and a warning not to wake the baby. He sat on the edge of the bed, right next to his grandson, and smiled at the sleeping boy.

“You have perfect timing Pop” Ashlyn grinned, happy that her father would get his first chance to do something everybody loved to do. “You wanna feed him?”

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The Championship game was another legendary battle between the two best teams in the league. Instead of being relieved that the Breakers’ best player wasn’t playing, the Thorns players were disappointed that they wouldn’t be facing their biggest rivals at full strength. Last year’s championship game was the only one they had played where both teams had been healthy, and the Breakers had won. The Thorns didn’t want to win this year’s Championship and have everybody
say it was because Rose Lavelle was injured. But that was sports. You didn’t get to choose your opponent. You had to play the team in front of you and do your best regardless who they were or how depleted their ranks. The Breakers knew they couldn’t win the midfield game without Lavelle. They would play their hearts out and do the very best they could, but the Thorns midfield was just too dominant and everybody could see that wasn’t where the Breakers were going to excel that day. Coach started a young, second year midfielder in Rose’s place, hoping she would rise to the occasion. But, just like in years past, the younger player was overwhelmed on the league’s biggest stage. Boston was down 2-0 as they went into the locker room at halftime.

When they took the pitch for the second half the Breakers had changed formations. They had nothing left to lose, so why not? Instead of sticking with their 4-4-2 which wasn’t working, they changed to a 3-5-2 to try and get another body into the attack and help out their overmatched midfield. They had played it a couple of times during the season so it wasn’t totally foreign to them. It was something they had in their arsenal. They played Christen Westphal, Whitney Engen and Megan Oyster across the back with Alyssha Chapman on the left flank and Julie King on the right. Kristie Mewis, Rosie White and Angela Salem played the middle with Tasha Dowie and Midge Purce up top. They had the players to make it work and they had been successful using it against the North Carolina Courage and their relentless attack earlier that season. The formation made Ashlyn’s job harder, relying on three in her backline instead of four against one of the most potent offenses in the league. But they just had to shake things up. It worked for almost thirty minutes. The Thorns had definitely not expected the formation and seemed confused about how to open up space in the middle. Boston took advantage. They scored in the 61st minute off an absolute screamer from Kristie Mewis just outside the box. It was a gorgeous goal, curving into the top left corner from just outside the 18. Leave it to the wily veteran to land the first punch and get things started for her team.

Portland looked momentarily stunned and Boston almost scored another one off of a mishandled back pass that just didn’t have enough on it to get all the way to their keeper. You could feel the mood shifting in the beautiful Portland stadium as the devout fans started to think that Boston might actually have a shot at winning the game after all. It got quiet, as quiet as a sold-out crowd of over 22,000 could get. Play continued for another ten minutes with a couple of good chances on nice crosses from Julie King and also Alyssa Chapman. Tasha Dowie needed just another couple of inches of height to connect on both of them. Five minutes later Rosie White intercepted a ball in the middle of the field and managed to get it up to Angela Salem at the top of the 18. Both Dowie and Purce were jockeying for position in front of the keeper and Kristie Mewis crept into the top corner of the 18 to make the defenders pay attention to her. Angela dished to Dowie on the right who made an unbelievable back heel flick pass across the face of the goal to Purce who buried it in the back of the net to tie the game. The small but vocal Breakers fans went crazy in the stands. Blue and White flags, banners, jerseys, pom-poms and signs flew all around as somebody let off the blue smoke to celebrate the goal.

There were fourteen minutes left, not including stoppage time, and Portland was pissed. The Breakers had been playing with a sort of carefree determination because no-one really expected them to come back from 2-0 at halftime. Maybe not even themselves, if they were being honest. Nobody said it out loud, but they had all been wondering it as they went in at the half. And Portland had all the pressure on them, even with a 2 goal lead. They hadn’t come out in the second half with their usual chippiness and it had cost them. The Thorns huddled up briefly after that goal and everybody in the stadium could see the fire burning brightly in captain Christine Sinclair’s eyes. And Tobin Heath was bouncing around like a monkey on crack. She was either going to score a goal or have a heart attack in the final fourteen minutes – there was no doubt in anyone’s mind on either team. Ashlyn rallied her defense and told Chapman and King not to get too far ahead and made sure Salem knew to expect a heavy dose of Sinclair, Heath and the rest of the
Thorns attack.

They did everything they could to hold off the Thorns, including getting two yellow cards in the process. They were both ticky-tacky fouls compared to the way the rest of the game had been called and the Breakers’ players weren’t happy about them. The defense handled both free kicks, although the second one caused a big scrum in front of the Breakers’ goal with an extremely fired up Ashlyn Harris going chest to chest with Nadia Nadim after the dust settled. Nadim always took things too far, she always had. Where most players would give a shove and say what they had to say and then walk away, she would give a shove, talk a lot and then give another even harder shove to escalate things. In this case, Ashlyn had taken umbrage at a particularly high kick from Nadim that none of the refs had seen. The ball wasn’t anywhere near her foot either and that’s what made the keeper so furious. Nadim was just trying to hurt somebody, or so it seemed. She didn’t back down, even as Ashlyn pointed to the blood coming down from her own ear where her kick had connected with the side of her head. Whitman started talking to the ref about what had happened and pointing to Ashlyn’s bloody ear as the chest bumping escalated, Ashlyn still holding the ball tightly against her side with one arm. Megan Oyster came to her defense as Angela Salem tried to separate the two angry players. Nadim violently pushed Salem away and earned a yellow card, the ref finally blowing his whistle, as Ashlyn kept talking to her. Sinclair and Heath finally got their arms around their teammate and dragged her away from the skirmish that she had created as Dani, the Breakers’ trainer, came out and tended to Ashlyn’s ear.

The Breakers fans in the crowd booed wildly when they saw the replay on the jumbo screen that clearly showed Nadim’s dirty play. The Breakers’ coach looked like his head was going to explode right there on the sideline. Two assistant coaches had to hold him back as he screamed at the fourth official on the sideline and then tried to go out on the field to ‘talk to’ the head official. The stadium didn’t show that replay again but the broadcast team sure did. Everybody watching it saw Nadim kick high at nothing but Ashlyn’s head and color commentator Heather O’Reilly said what most of the fans were thinking.

“You just really hate to see that type of play anywhere, but especially in a game this big with two teams of this caliber. That’s just busch-league and it has no place in this game. It should have been a red card for sure.”

But it wasn’t. After a long time and two failed attempts, the ref ok’d the repair job Dani had done on Ashlyn’s ear. She looked ridiculous with a bandage wrapped several times diagonally around her head to hold the gauze in place over her left ear. But there was no way she was coming out. She hadn’t been kicked directly in the head, but the spikes from Nadim’s cleat had ripped the outside edge of her ear and scratched the outside of her jaw, right next to her ear. The game resumed and, unfortunately, the break in the action seemed to have worked in the Thorns’ favor. They looked calm and organized and Boston looked unnerved and out of sorts for the last five minutes of the game. There were three minutes of stoppage time added, which was an insanely small amount of time considering that Ashlyn’s ear repair had taken about ten minutes just on its’ own, and the score was still 2-2. Boston realized they weren’t going to win the game by sitting back and doing nothing but defending so they sent the wide players down the pitch, hoping to make some magic happen in the last minute of stoppage time. Tasha Dowie got a very good shot on goal that the keeper couldn’t handle. Just before Rosie White got her boot on the rebound one of the Portland defenders cleared it wide and another player sent it back down towards midfield. Two quick passes later and the counter attack was steaming towards Ashlyn with Tobin Heath leading the charge. The FIFA women’s best player of the year was in a full sprint with the ball at her feet and only Whitney Engen to beat to the keeper.

‘Fuck’ Ashlyn thought as she barked commands to Whitney who was backing up and trying to angle Tobin away from the goal. The midfielder put some dazzling moves on, slowing down just a
bit to complete the maneuvers that usually worked on everyone else she played against. But Whitney knew her friend and former teammate’s moves well and was able to just get a piece of the ball as Tobin tried to nutmeg her. The back of Whitney’s heel knocked the ball away and sent it spinning towards the middle of the box. Ashlyn took off towards it as fast as she could but Allie Long, who had been trailing the play, got to it first. She tried to kick it over Ashlyn’s outstretched arm as the keeper slid, spread-eagled, in front of her to close down the angle and block off any low shots. In a testament to her sheer athleticism and lightning fast reaction time, Ashlyn managed to get her left hand up and get the tips of her fingers on the hard shot. It wasn’t enough to block it but she had pushed it higher and it sailed towards the crossbar as everybody in the stadium held their breath. The ball hit the bottom of the crossbar and bounced down, just inside the goal line as Ashlyn watched helplessly from her back. Megan Oyster had made it back and was almost able to get to it, kicking the ball back out of the goal in frustration a split second after it landed.

In the days to come the Breakers would submit official complaints to the league for the non-call on Nadim’s vicious kick as well as the paltry three minutes of stoppage time that should have been at least ten minutes, and that was being conservative. Every women’s soccer commentator, writer and fan had no choice but to agree with both points. In the quiet of the off-season the league suspended Nadia Nadim for the first four games of the 2020 season for her ‘flagrantly dangerous’ high kick. But none of that changed the outcome that October day. Portland beat Boston 3-2 to reclaim the championship they had traded back and forth for the past three years. The two teams were a little less friendly than usual during the congratulatory handshakes. Somebody wisely kept Nadim away from that courteous tradition, which was better for everybody at that point. Ashlyn and Whitney stood there near the sideline, arm in arm with the rest of their teammates, and watched the Thorns celebrate on their home pitch. They watched every minute of it without saying a word. If one of the Breakers players moved towards the locker room or started to walk away, they were pulled back in by Kristie or Tasha or Whitney or Megan or Angela or Ashlyn.

“No” the keeper told the young midfielder who had started in place of Rose Lavelle that game as she started to walk away. “You stand here with us and watch this. Watch all of it and remember exactly what this feels like.” She put her arm around her shoulder, keeper’s gloves still on. “Next year when we’re playing this game on our pitch this will not happen to us again. We won’t let it.”
There was no time to wallow in their defeat. Whitney’s wedding was taking place in Chapel Hill, NC the next Saturday and there was shit to be done! The Breakers’ year end party had been changed so that they could all celebrate at Whitney’s wedding reception together. Much like they had done for Ashlyn when she got married, almost the entire team was flying to NC to attend their captain’s wedding. The team flew back to Boston late Sunday night and started their season-ending meetings with coaches and the medical staff before they were officially finished with their Breakers’ obligations for the season. Ashlyn and Whitney were driving to Chapel Hill as part of the keeper’s Subaru Road Trip series. It would be the fourth and final trip that year and neither woman wanted to do it when it came time to load up the big SUV that Subaru wanted them to drive. Ashlyn regretted asking her best friend to do it way back at the beginning of the year when she had planned the trips out. And Whitney regretted saying yes. They were both tired of travelling and still pretty ticked off about the Portland game. Neither of them was in a very good mood.

“Babe, you have to do it and you have to make it fun for Whit. Just think of everything she did for us for our wedding...”

“I know. Of course I’m going to do it and I’ll make her have fun if I have to completely embarrass myself in public to do it.” Ashlyn was grumpy and taking it out on her wife as she tried to fold clean clothes and pack for the trip and all of the events for the wedding weekend. Ali stood still and levelled the blonde with a look. “I’m sorry. I’m just...ugghh.”

“I know sweetheart” Ali’s face changed to a warm smile as she put down the laundry basket of clean clothes and gave her wife a hug. “I know.”

Ashlyn would never forget the million thoughtful things her best friend had done for her when she got married. To be honest, the keeper was having a really hard time with letting Whitney go. They had lived together in the big old house for the past four years, and in the apartment in Boston for the year before that. Whitney had always been like family to the keeper, but now, after helping them with every part of their lives including the wedding and Ali’s pregnancy and taking care of both of them and the house and the dogs after Drew was born...there wasn’t an adequate relationship description for what Whitney Elizabeth Engen meant to Ashlyn. Aside from Ali, there was nobody else on the planet that the keeper liked spending time with as much or trusted as much or laughed with as much or loved as much. She didn’t want Whitney to move out of the house. She felt like she was losing her best friend from all areas of her life in a very short period of time. In her better, stronger moments, Ashlyn knew that both of those changes were things that Whitney wanted and were going to make her very happy. In those moments, the blonde was happy for her best friend and couldn’t wait to celebrate her wedding with her and try her damnedest to win for her on the soccer pitch. But in her weaker, darker moments the keeper felt sorry for herself.

“At least she’s staying in Boston with us” Ali pointed out the first time her wife had confessed how upset she was about losing her bestie. “She could very easily have gone back to North Carolina or
Ali tried to be patient with her but she felt like Ashlyn was overreacting a bit. Did she honestly expect Whitney to live with them forever? But the brunette tried to put herself in her wife’s shoes and had to admit that if she had Sydney living with them the way Whitney had been it would be extremely hard to have her move out.

The trip would take about eleven and a half hours to complete. They left the big old house Wednesday morning with a packed SUV, a cooler and a whole bunch of snacks. Subaru was paying for their hotel in Washington, DC which they would get to after 7 hours of driving the first day. They decided not to stop and visit Meg because the visit would be so short that it would do nothing but upset the girl. Ashlyn checked with Hannah to make sure they were doing the right thing and she agreed completely. Instead, Ashlyn and Joanna Lohman got a bunch of soccer gals and other friends together and they went out and had a great time at a couple of clubs and restaurants before crashing back at the hotel. Ashlyn dutifully documented all of the driving for Subaru and posted a lot of video to her Instagram story and other social media as well. And she interviewed the hell out of Whitney as they drove. They talked about all sorts of different things that ranged from soccer to politics to law school and why she wanted to be lawyer. The conversation naturally went to her retirement, which hadn’t been announced yet. By the time the Subaru Road Trip video aired, in a couple of months, it would be time for the defender to tell the Breakers what her plans were anyway. She didn’t want to leave them in the lurch so she would be sure to tell them before the January draft. So the two friends spoke freely about what kind of lawyer she hoped to be and what sort of change she hoped to bring about in the world through her work.

“When I was younger I wanted to be a lawyer so I could help the little guys out there who were always getting stepped on. But over the years I’ve seen what so many people are starting to understand about the equality movement and how important it is in so many different ways. Until we have equality for all women in all positions our economy and culture will continue to suffer. We’ll never be able to better ourselves as a country and a people until we level the playing field. I’d like to be involved in that somehow. I haven’t figured out exactly what that will be, but that’s where my passion is. And if I can help do that, level that playing field and put everybody on the same plane then I’ll be helping all those little guys out at the same time.”

It hadn’t taken long for Whitney to start enjoying their road trip. Her face was sore from laughing so much before they even hit NYC their first day. She got stressed out over some wedding emails right after they checked into the hotel in DC but then put that all behind her and had a wonderful night out with the girls. Both Ashlyn and Whitney were a little sad as they started day two, knowing their special time together would be over in less than five hours.

“Can I tell you something Ash?” the defender asked as she drove them across the border from Virginia into North Carolina, less than an hour left in their road trip.

“Dirty truth?” Ashlyn asked with a grin, her GoPro still documenting the conversation and drive.

“Always” Whitney grinned and took a beat. “Now, I don’t want you to get a big head about this or anything, so try and remain calm when you hear what I’m about to say. Ok?”

“Well now you’re just making me nervous” she teased.

“I should thank you, first of all, for opening your home to me and letting me live with you for four years” she chuckled. “Thank you.”
“Hey now, you know I’m the one who got the better end of that deal. You’re an awesome roommate. I got to live with my best friend. And you helped me figure so many things out Whit” Ashlyn started to think about everything they had been through together. “Man, I’m going to miss living with you” her voice was quiet and sad.

“Alright, so it worked out well for both of us then. I’ll agree to that” Whitney laughed. “And for the record, I’m going to miss living with you too.” They shared a look and both grinned at each other. “But that’s not what I want to tell you.”

“Oh Lord, woman, spit it out will you?!” the keeper joked. “We’ll be there in, like, twenty minutes” she laughed and smacked Whitney on the shoulder.

The defender took a minute to compose herself and make sure what she wanted to say came out right.

“I want to tell you that I’ve learned a lot from you Ash. About how to be a strong leader and a good friend and a great neighbor and most recently, a wonderful wife and mom.” She paused and fought the emotion starting to choke her throat. “I just want you to know that because I don’t think you give yourself enough credit.”

“Geez Whit” she replied as her emotions took off on her again. “Why’d you have to go and make me cry?”

“The important stuff will do that to you” Whitney smiled and reached over to pat her best friend on the leg.

“The dirty truth, Whitney Elizabeth Engen, is that you make me a better person. You always have. And I hope you always will.”

They pulled into the Fearrington House Inn just outside Chapel Hill, NC Thursday late afternoon. It was basically a big old historic farm that had been renovated and turned into a fancy hotel with a spa and a several big spaces that were used for events like weddings and conferences and things like that. Whitney had fallen in love with it way back in college and had never found anywhere she thought was more beautiful or perfect for her wedding. Ryan had splurged and taken her there for one of their anniversaries and he swore he’d never seen her look happier. It was a huge place. There were 60 acres of pastures and cows and a gorgeous garden area with brick walkways that wove in and around all the lush plants, trees and flowers. There was an enormous barn that had been converted into a large event space. That was where the reception was going to be after they exchanged vows in an outdoor setting on a huge brick patio overlooking the rolling fields. The rehearsal dinner on Friday night was held in the Garden Terrace which was another outdoor area with an immense stone fireplace that had been part of an original farm building that had burned down decades ago. All the big, grand oak trees you think about when you think about the South, were part of the landscape too. They surrounded the Garden Terrace on three sides and created a unique feel in the outdoor space. There were 32 rooms and Whitney and Ryan’s guests were occupying almost all of them. Not everybody was staying at the Inn, it was expensive as hell, even with the reduced ‘event rate’ for wedding guests. A lot of people were staying at hotels in nearby Durham or Raleigh. The Inn was an amazingly beautiful location for a wedding and they were experts at handling weddings of all sizes right there onsite with a world-famous five diamond restaurant as well as a couple of other smaller restaurants on the property as well. Ashlyn loved so much about her NC roots and experiences. She had learned more about herself in the five years she lived there than almost anywhere else on earth. And she loved that the Inn was so quintessentially Whitney. Not the fanciness or expense of it, that was definitely not Whitney. But the elegance and the Southern charm and the warm and welcoming hospitality of the place smacked of what was at
the core of her best friend. The Inn was a wonderful blend of classy elegance and southern charm and casual hospitality. That was a great way to describe the way Whitney’s California upbringing had meshed with her very formative years in NC, producing the exceptional human that was Ms. Whitney Engen.

Ashlyn and Whitney checked into their rooms and the first thing the keeper did was get her wife on Facetime and show her how freaking awesome their room was. They spent twenty minutes talking and Ashlyn ended the call telling the brunette to hurry up and get there already. The wedding weekend trip was going to be the couple’s first time leaving the baby behind for more than just a quick overnight. They were staying at the Inn for three nights, returning home on Monday afternoon. Ken and Vicki were staying at the big old house to babysit and dog sit and seemed quite happy to do so. Ali had thought about having Sydney help out but she was going to the wedding too, just staying for the one night instead of making a mini-vacation out of it like Ali and Ashlyn were doing. The brunette was nervous as hell about leaving her baby boy for three nights, but they had been planning this long weekend for months and she had been working her ass off to get back into shape so she could fit into one of her fancy dresses and feel gorgeous again. It was important for she and her wife to make time for themselves and they both knew it.

The wedding rehearsal went well Friday late afternoon and was followed by a delicious rehearsal dinner out in the Garden Terrace. Ali couldn’t get over all the beautiful areas in and around the Inn. Ashlyn teased her about trying to keep her mouth closed because her jaw was on the floor every time she turned around. When they all walked from the ceremony spot down to the barn where the reception was to be held, the brunette was skeptical.

“A barn? Really?” she wasn’t being judgmental as much as she was genuinely questioning how beautiful a barn space could possibly be.

“Just wait til you see it” Ashlyn replied and squeezed her hand as they walked together.

“Wow.” Ali was speechless for a full minute as she took in all that the barn had to offer. “Her barn is prettier than our castle was” she chuckled. “This place is incredible.”

The brunette had never met any of Ryan’s family, and he had a lot of them. He had two brothers and a sister but also about a thousand cousins. Ali knew Whitney’s mom and dad pretty well from the times they had visited Boston, even staying at the big old house one time. She had also spent time with them at the various big playoff games and championship games over the past four years. Of course they knew and loved Ashlyn dearly and had heard all about Ali and the dogs and the baby from Whitney.

On Saturday Ashlyn was busy being matron of honor and stuck pretty close to the bride-to-be to make sure she had everything she needed. It was ok because Sydney flew down that morning and spent the day at the spa with Ali. The wedding was beautiful and Whitney looked absolutely gorgeous. Everybody sort of took her beauty for granted because it was often hidden behind a soccer scowl and a ponytail or braid. But Ali was sure she had never seen a more beautiful bride than Whitney. It was a late afternoon ceremony and then the guests were encouraged to move down to the barn, but they were welcome to stroll around the gardens and other spaces if they preferred while the pictures were taken. Ali hung with Sydney and most of the soccer ladies, drinking just a little bit too much as they waited for the reception to officially start. The brunette hadn’t had a lot to drink in thirteen months and she was definitely out of practice. She had decided she was going to have fun that weekend and drink more than she was supposed to if she wanted to. She would just throw away the milk she pumped while the alcohol was in her system.

About an hour into the reception, just as dinner was coming to a close, Ashlyn realized that her
wife had been gone for a long time. She scanned the room for Sydney but didn’t see her either. She went to her teammates for information and Julie King told her that Ali had been a little drunk and Kristie and Sydney took her back to the room so she could pump. The sight that greeted the keeper when she opened the door to her room was one she would not soon forget. She could hear the giggling and snorting laughter all the way down the hallway and smiled, despite her worry, as she slid her key card into the slot.

“What is going on in here?” she asked in disbelief as she tried not to laugh out loud at her tipsy wife.

“Hi babe!” Ali yelled from her spot on the comfortable armchair that had been pushed over next to the tv. She was topless, the upper part of her dress pooled around her waist, and Kristie and Sydney were each holding one of the milk storage bags under her breasts for her as she held the pump in her hands, plugged in behind the tv. “I’m almost done. I think.”

“Hey! Keep’s here!” Kristie grinned and waved when she saw Ashlyn staring at them from the doorway. The noise from the pump and the music they were listening to on Sydney’s phone made it hard to hear. “I’m just helping your lovely wife out for a few minutes” she added, her words slightly slurred.

Ashlyn couldn’t help herself and took a quick picture. She decided to be kind and not video the hilarious scene. She wasn’t sure why they were using the electrical outlet behind the tv and not the one on the other side of the room near the table where Ali had pumped every other time since she’d been there. But because there was no place to put the pump where they were, Ali had to hold it. Why she needed two hands was another mystery. But, because Ali’s hands were busy and she wasn’t wearing one of her nursing bras, somebody had to hold the milk storage bags. As the blonde stood there working all of these things out in her head, Sydney got back to dancing to the music, as she must have been before Ashlyn got there. Both Kristie and Ali cracked up as the coach did some hysterical interpretive dance moves and tried not to spill the milk she was holding for her best friend. Oh if only the keeper didn’t have a bride to tend to she could spend the rest of the night watching these three goofballs and enjoy every minute of it. When it became clear to her that Ali was indeed done pumping she moved to her wife and shut the pump off for her.

“Oh oh” Ali said, still tipsy. “We forgot the caps” her head turned back towards the table on the other side of the room. “Let’s go get ‘em” she instructed as she stood up, still holding the pump, and tried to get Kristie and Sydney to walk with her across the room.

“Wait, wait, Al” Ashlyn stopped them before they had taken more than a step. “I’ll get them. You all just stay there.”

She helped her wife sit back down and take the breast shields off of her nipples so she could cap the storage bags.

“Damn, I do not miss that” Sydney shook her head as she looked at Ali’s red and slightly chapped nipples. “Wait til he starts getting his teeth” she made a terrified face that made the brunette laugh. “You laugh now, but you will not think it’s funny when he bites down on those babies.”

Ashlyn started to put the pump and its’ parts and pieces back onto the table where they belonged.

“Hey” Kristie whined and pouted at Ali who sat there, still topless and apparently unbothered by it. “You said I could try it.”

“She’s right babe” Ali agreed. “I told her if she helped me she could try it.”
“Well I don’t have time to do that right now ladies. I’ve got to get back to the reception. Remember, Whitney just got married and I’m the matron of honor so I’ve gotta...”

“Has anybody ever looked less like a matron in her entire fucking life?” Sydney giggled and eyed the keeper up and down, licking her lips playfully.

Ashlyn looked good. Whitney’s bridesmaids all wore matching pale blue dresses but she had made sure Ashlyn was comfortable in a trim suit the same color. It was a beautiful subtle suit, not some horrible prom tuxedo disaster from hell, and the keeper wore it well. Her hair was behind her head in a tight bun and her make-up was perfect and just dramatic enough for an important event like her best friend’s wedding.

“Hey!” Ali smacked Sydney’s hip. “Cut that out, she’s taken.” She tried to sound serious, because she was serious, but she knew Sydney was just trying to get a rise out of her.

“Aren’t any of you sober enough to go back to the barn?” the keeper asked, starting to get a little frustrated.

“I am Keep” Kristie said proudly.

“I am too” Ali said just as proudly and stood up, her dress still around her waist.

“Girl, you’re still half-naked” Sydney laughed and smacked the brunette’s butt as she spoke. “You’re not going anywhere like that.”

“Here, honey” Ashlyn walked over to stand in front of her wife and help her get dressed again. “Where’s your bra?” she asked as she looked inside the gathered dress material around Ali’s hips. She turned her head to look around the room for it. “Anybody see it?”

As soon as one of Ashlyn’s hands touched the bare skin of Ali’s stomach, the brunette came alive. She stepped closer to her wife and pressed herself up against Ashlyn’s chest, wrapping her arms around her neck and pulling her down into a passionate kiss.

“Ok, well, we’re out then” Sydney walked past the couple and pulled Kristie with her towards the door.

“Wait, Syd” Ashlyn managed to get out after pulling back from the kiss and looking pleadingly at the coach.

“Don’t look at me, I’m not the one who did that to her.”

“Yes you are” the keeper argued. “She was like this when I got here!”

It took another agonizing thirty minutes for Ashlyn to find the flimsy bra that went with the dress – it was behind the tv – and get her wife dressed again. She made her drink some water to get sobered up so they could go back to the reception.

“I’m so sorry Ash” Ali’s voice was small and soft as she finished her water. “You can just leave me here tonight if you want. I wouldn’t blame you.”

“Baby, don’t be silly” the keeper smiled at her embarrassed wife as she helped her put her heels back on and straighten out the straps of her slinky, sexy, dark blue dress. “You haven’t had much to drink in forever, of course you got drunk crazy fast. Your body’s not used to it.” She kissed her lips softly. “It’s ok. But let’s get back over there now, alright?”
Thankfully all they had missed was a good portion of the dancing and drinking in the huge barn. The keeper checked in with the bride and let her know she was back. Whitney got the lowdown on what happened and told her best friend to relax and go dance with her beautiful wife for a while. And that’s what they did. They were a beautiful couple and they held each other close as they moved together on the dance floor. After almost an hour, they were both turned on and ready to go back to their room and have sex. But Ashlyn’s work wasn’t done.

“Soon baby, soon” she promised and kissed her wife’s hungry lips again.

They made it through the tossing of the bouquet, one of Ryan’s cousins caught it, and the removal of the garter, another one of Ryan’s cousins caught that, and only had the cutting of the cake left before they could leave. Ashlyn felt guilty wishing to speed her way through Whitney’s wedding reception. Ali in that dress was tempting as hell and it was their first full weekend away since well before the baby. They were both excited and out of practice being out in social situations if anybody really wanted the truth. After the garter toss several people went out the back of the barn to another open air porch area where some expensive cigars were offered to the guests. There sat Heather O’Reilly and her husband Dave, and Tobin Heath and Christen Press, along with a handful of other UNC alumnae smoking cigars and sipping their drinks like civilized southerners. Ashlyn quickly joined them and offered her wife one as well. Ali used the breastfeeding as an excuse and declined. The keeper sat in the big leather chair on the end, near the side railing, and carefully lit up her cigar, pulling her beautiful wife onto her lap at the same time. As she took in the view of the dark, rolling pastures off of the porch the brunette remembered Ashlyn smoking cigars in the backyard with Whitney, Tobin, Allie and Kling during one of their visits. She loved learning new things about her keeper and she loved the way Ashlyn’s hand felt, low on her hip, fingers just grazing the top of her ass every time she moved her hand back and forth in a slow, careless pattern.

The brunette had tried smoking a cigar at Penn State and gotten sick from it. She wasn’t the only one. Half of the team threw up most of the night their freshman year. Similarly, the cigars were originally a hazing ritual at UNC, designed to make the rookies respond exactly the way Ali and most of her teammates had. But Whitney, Ashlyn and Tobin’s class was different. They took the challenge and made it their own, turning it into something they loved to do instead of something that would make them sick. It had taken a little practice at first, but they became first class cigar smoking bitches and basically told the upperclassmen to fuck off in the process. Heather had been one of those upperclassmen and those freshmen had earned her undying respect that year. Whitney poked her head out the back of the barn a few minutes later.

“Hey! You were supposed to come get me Tobes” she swatted Tobin in the shoulder as she walked by and picked up a cigar.

Tobin offered the bride her seat and helped her light the cigar. She smiled when Christen stood up and joined her as she leaned against the railing, throwing her arm around the beautiful striker’s shoulder and kissing her cheek. Kling joined them next and then Allie and soon the porch was too full and too smoky and the tarheels who had been there first moved away to make room for the newcomers. Ali didn’t want to get up and move. She was enjoying the way Ashlyn’s hand moved up, around and across her back, bare skin tingling under her touch. The keeper’s hand travelled back down to her hip with a gentle squeeze to her ass every so often as well. Ali was sitting sideways across her lap with her right arm around the back of Ashlyn’s neck, her fingers playing with the soft hairs at the nape of her neck. Her left hand was inside her keeper’s suit jacket, lazily moving up and down her side and chest and breast. Every time Ashlyn squeezed her ass, Ali would apply pressure to her wife’s nipple, even pinching it as they took their time and worked each other up.

“I need to use the restroom” Ashlyn said quietly and kissed Ali on the cheek as she patted her ass.
“I’ll come with you.”

“We’ll be right back guys” the keeper said as they walked back through the others on the porch.

“We’re doing the cake in twenty minutes” Whitney called after them and grinned knowingly at Tobin.

There were a bunch of different bathrooms all throughout the Inn. The main restrooms for the barn were at the other end, but there were two smaller bathrooms down near the porch end, apparently for fellow smokers to use. These smaller bathrooms had two small stalls in them, neither of which was handicapped accessible, and a counter with a sink. As soon as the door closed behind them Ashlyn pushed her wife up against it and kissed her hard, making her moan loudly.

“Shhhhh, sexy” the keeper whispered into her ear and then licked her way around the perimeter of it.

The porch continued to be a popular spot and they could hear every word Tobin and Kling and Whitney were saying from where they were in the bathroom. There was no way they could do anything in there without being heard by almost half of the wedding guests. They kissed again, frustrated by not being able to go through with Ashlyn’s plan.

“The cake is in twenty minutes” Ali panted out in a hoarse whisper. “I’m going to pee.”

The brunette used one stall and Ashlyn used the other one. Ali finished first and as she went to the sink to wash her hands she saw her wife’s half-smoked cigar resting carefully on the edge of the counter. She got wet just thinking about what she wanted to do but then talked herself out of it as she washed her hands. She knew she would only have another minute to decide before Ashlyn came out of the stall and she lost her opportunity. ‘Why the hell not’ she said to herself and quickly picked up Ashlyn’s cigar. Ali put her back against the door so nobody would walk in on her and then hitched up her dress and pulled her panties down to her knees. She heard Ashlyn’s belt buckle clang as the keeper buttoned and zipped her pants in the stall. The brunette only had a few seconds. She ran her fingers through her own wet folds and closed her eyes as her desire spiked again. She took the cigar and moved the head of it down and back up through her folds, coating it with her passion. She gave it one more trip down and back up and then quickly pulled her panties up and fixed her dress. A second later, Ashlyn came out of her stall and washed her hands.

“Thanks for holding that for me baby” she pressed a kiss into Ali’s lips as she took the cigar back from her. “I hate to put it down like that, especially in a bathroom. You never know where it’s been.”

The brunette laughed and tried to cover it with a cough.

“You ok honey?”

“Yes” she pretend wheezed out and opened the bathroom door. “Must be some smoke or something.”

What Ali learned over the next forty-five minutes was how little cigar smokers actually smoked their goddamned cigars sometimes. She was beginning to lose hope for her little trick after they watched Whitney and Ryan cut their beautiful wedding cake and then even shared their own piece of the delicious cake. The smokers stayed near the back porch so they didn’t have to leave their cigars, and Ali and Christen brought back plates of cake for the group. It wasn’t until twenty minutes after the cake when Ryan and Whitney thanked everybody for coming and sharing their special day with them, that Ashlyn finally put the cigar back into her mouth. The brunette watched
her from her spot just inside the back door of the barn where she was carefully sipping a glass of champagne with Christen and some other soccer players. The keeper stood just outside the barn door, leaning against the other side of it and looking gorgeous, like she was posing for a movie poster or something. She laughed and smirked at something Allie said out of Ali’s view and then lit her cigar again, still holding it between her fingers. That’s how fucking long it had been since she puffed on it. It had gone out. After a minute above the flame the tip was lit again and she put the cigar between her lips, closed them around it and puffed on it four or five quick times to make sure it was good and lit. As soon as she took the first puff her eyes went big and then got really dark before she closed them for a minute and kept puffing. After the fifth puff she took it out of her mouth and looked approvingly at the tip. She said something else to Allie and then turned her attention inside the barn as she scanned the area for her beautiful brunette.

Ryan and Whitney left the reception and everybody clapped, cheered and whistled at them as they made their escape to the most deluxe suite in the Inn for their romantic wedding night. Ashlyn saw the best man, one of Ryan’s brothers, walking by and called him over to see if there was anything else she could do. She shook his hand and nodded at him as he moved away again. It was then that she saw Ali, eyes locking on her gorgeous target and raking up and down her wife’s sexy body in that slinky fucking dress and smirking. They stared at each other. Ali’s face was a mixture of the most self-satisfied smirk and the sweetest smile and Ashlyn’s heart skipped a beat. She put the cigar back between her lips and puffed on it several more times, eager to finish it so they could move on to other things. She motioned with her chin for her wife to come join her and the brunette excused herself from her present company and walked slowly over to her keeper. Ashlyn bent her elbow out and Ali slipped her arm through it and leaned up against the blonde’s side. She leaned over and kissed her cheek before whispering hotly in her ear.

“How’s the cigar? Taste alright?”

That was all it took to break her. The combination of Ali’s hot breath against her ear and the taste of her passion in her mouth was too much to withstand any longer. Ashlyn left her almost finished cigar to extinguish safely on its own in the ashtray behind her and took her wife by the hand. They walked around the outside of the barn, following the brick path and hoping to avoid running into anybody else who might cause another delay. When they finally got to their room Ashlyn unlocked the door with her wife draped all over her, hands already undoing the buttons on her shirt as her lips moved across her jaw and up to her mouth. The door swung open and the keeper lifted Ali up around her waist, walked her through the door, put her back down and brought their lips together in a hungry kiss. She moved them backwards towards the bed as the brunette’s fingers continued working on the last few buttons. Once her shirt was open she let Ali push it and her suit jacked off her shoulders, letting them both fall to the floor as the brunette reached behind her keeper and undid her sexy black bra. Ashlyn lifted her wife’s dress up above her hips and eagerly pulled her panties down to her thighs before pushing her backwards onto the bed where she bounced once and moaned. The keeper stood there and unbuckled her belt and pants and dropped them to the ground, losing her bra at the same time. Ali took off her heels one at a time as she lay there on her back watching the sexy blonde and tossed them back down to the floor. She pulled her dress up over her head and then took her practically useless bra off and waited, completely naked, for her wife to take her.

Ashlyn didn’t make her wait long. She had stepped out of her shoes and removed her socks and boxer briefs while she watched Ali doing the same on the bed. The keeper knelt by the edge of the bed and pulled her wife closer to her by her hips. She took the brunette’s strong legs and put them over her own powerful shoulders as they stared at each other with such a lustful gaze that it felt like they were actually on fire. Ali’s chest was already heaving, too excited from the long drawn out foreplay that had taken all night long, as she waited impatiently for Ashlyn to touch her.
“Ash, please...”

The keeper turned her head to the side but kept her eyes on her favorite chocolate ones as she kissed her way from Ali’s knee to her upper thigh, already wet for her. She gave her wife one long, broad lick from bottom to top, avoiding her clit for the moment, and then kissed her way from Ali’s other knee to her upper thigh. The incredible scent of Ali’s pussy made her dizzy with want and any idea she had of prolonging the teasing disappeared as soon as her brain registered the tantalizing aroma.

“Fuck” she said in a tense, strangled voice as she buried her face between her wife’s legs.

“Oh yesss. Fuck, that’s so good. Oh yeah babe” Ali moaned as she held Ashlyn’s face tight against her entrance and started grinding against her.

“Mmmmmmm...Mmmmmmm...” the keeper moaned loudly as she devoured her wife.

Her tongue licked patterns through her folds and she sucked her slippery lips into her mouth and licked them inside there before thrusting her hard tongue as deep as she could into Ali’s core. She was relentless and the more pressure the brunette put on the back of her head with her hands and the front of her face with her grinding, the hungrier Ashlyn got.

Ali felt like she was burning from the inside out as hot waves of pleasure surged through her entire body. She was moaning and groaning almost non-stop, and she thrashed her head back and forth on the bed as she clung to the back of her keeper’s head. The brunette tore at the tight bun that constrained the long blonde locks she wanted to wrap her fingers in. She finally managed to release the band and began pulling blonde strands free, shouting out when she felt her wife’s aggressive mouth move up to her aching clit.

“Fuck! Oh my God...”

Ashlyn was getting more turned on by the second between the gorgeous pussy in her face, filling her nose and flooding her senses with pure, raw desire, and the way the brunette was clawing at her hair. The keeper wasn’t normally into too much hair pulling, but fuck if it wasn’t doing it for her that night. Her heart was racing and pounding and her stomach was doing flip flops as the fierce lust took over her whole being. She shoved two fingers into Ali’s core and started thrusting immediately, medium paced for a minute but then right up to fast and furious after another few minutes.

“Jesus, yes...unnnhh...ohhhh...fuck...” Ali moaned and closed her eyes as all the sensations started to overwhelm her.

She had one hand still tangled up in blonde hair behind Ashlyn’s head while her other arm tried to hold her bouncing breasts still. She was rolling her hips and trying to match her keeper’s fast rhythm. The sensations coming from her clit were incredible as Ashlyn spent as much time flicking it with her muscular tongue as she did teasing it with hot breaths and strong sucks.

“More babe, a little more...” Ali mumbled as she pressed her head back into the bed and arched her back.

Ashlyn stopped for a second and added a third finger before slowly starting to thrust again. The brunette’s pussy was absolutely drenched so she felt it was safe to keep going. She worked back up to speed and was pumping Ali fast and deep and hard in another couple of minutes.

“Yessssss...” the brunette’s voice was rough and low and filled with passion as she writhed on the bed. “Oh God, babe, yes. I’m so fucking close...”
Sweat started collecting between Ashlyn’s shoulder blades and breasts as she labored to bring her love the orgasm she was waiting for. Her arm ached and her jaw was starting to get sore but there was no way she was slowing down or stopping until she got Ali off. The brunette’s heels kicked against her back every once in a while as she arched her back or flexed her legs responsively. History had proven that Ashlyn was risking bodily harm in this position. She tried to remind herself to hold on to Ali’s legs once her orgasm hit. The blonde reached up with her left hand and wrapped her fingers around her wife’s wrist, still holding on to her own breasts. She squeezed it a couple of times and then tried to help hold the bouncing beauties steady as she felt her wife’s walls clamp down on her thrusting fingers. It only took another few seconds before Ali’s orgasm took over.

“Ohhh!” she yelled out as her whole body tensed for a few seconds and then began convulsing and shaking as she moaned and cursed loudly.

Ashlyn pulled her mouth back and slowed her thrusting way down as her wife came undone in her arms. She tried to hold Ali’s strong legs but instead of kicking through this orgasm, they squeezed tightly against the blonde’s head. She looked up to try and watch her gorgeous wife ride out her bliss and felt something warm on her left hand. Ashlyn was in heaven. Her face was in her favorite place, pressed between Ali’s thighs, and she thought her heart was going to explode out of her chest as she watched her wife’s sultry body twitching and heaving and shaking in front of her.

Ali let go of her keeper’s hair and tried to pull her up as she came down from her high. She wanted to feel her gorgeous wife and hold her close. The brunette realized that Ashlyn couldn’t move until she released her thighs that were still on the keeper’s shoulders and squeezing her head tightly.

“Sorry babe” she chuckled breathlessly. “Did I hurt you?” She lifted her head and tried to get her eyes to focus.

“Nah, I’m good. I’m fucking awesome. That was incredible” she grinned and her dimple popped out as she caressed Ali’s thighs and let them hang off the side of the bed. “I may have to do this all night long.”

“Shit” Ali panted out as she looked down at herself.

Ashlyn heard the frustration in her wife’s voice and put together what the warmth was she had felt on her left hand when Ali had climaxed. The keeper reached behind her and grabbed her boxer briefs off the floor. She helped the brunette move further up onto the bed so her legs weren’t dangling off the edge anymore and then crawled up her body.

“It’s ok baby” the blonde purred as she licked up some of the breastmilk from her stomach and used her underwear to mop up the rest. Ali hadn’t pumped in a while so there was quite a bit that had leaked out. “You are so fucking sexy Al. I swear to God you almost give me a heart attack every time we fuck. Every single time.”

Ali appreciated her wife trying to help her past her minor embarrassment and frustration about the leaking with what she thought was kindness and sweet flattery. But when she saw the lustful look in Ashlyn’s dark, lidded eyes she knew she wasn’t just trying to make her feel better. Leaking breastmilk truly didn’t bother her keeper one bit and she had said so time and again. In that moment, finally, Ali believed her and that ravenous look on her face was all the proof she would ever need.

“God I love you” she whispered as Ashlyn gently licked up the last few drops from her breasts and tossed her underwear back down to the floor. “My heart hurts I love you so much right now.”

The keeper was finally beside her and she brought their lips together in a deep kiss that took both
their breaths away. Ashlyn pulled back for air and smirked at her sexy wife.

“Show me.”
November Change

The bitter disappointment of losing the Championship game stuck with Ashlyn for longer than she thought it would. Part of it was the way it felt as though it had been stolen from them. It would have been easier to accept the loss if they had just been beaten and outplayed. The NWSL had made some great strides over the past few years, more teams, more female head coaches, better stadiums and conditions, but it still had a ways to go. Officiating had always been something of an embarrassment to the league and the latest example had happened during the biggest game of the season and had been broadcast on live tv for everybody to see. The league formed an exploratory committee to start looking into how to improve the quality of the officiating. It was comprised of a combination of team owners, a couple of head coaches, some knowledgeable and well-respected journalists, and a handful of players both past and present. Ashlyn found herself on conference calls with coaches like Laura Harvey, Tom Sermanni, Vlatko Andonovski and Christie Pierce. The players involved included some of the blonde’s idols: Mia Hamm, Briana Scurry and Kristine Lilly from the 1999 World Cup Championship team, and Abby Wambach, Lauren Holiday and Alex Morgan from the 2015 team. At first they were all disappointed when it seemed like the league had put together the group just to appease fans and get some good publicity. But they realized during the first conference call that even if that was what the league had originally planned, they all had the power to turn it into something truly impactful. And that’s what they did.

During the course of that offseason, the committee mobilized and interviewed as many officials as possible to get their perspective on the problem. Then they added a few of those officials to the committee and got to work on how to fix those problems. The league’s plan may have been to trot out its’ best and most popular stars for nothing more than a simple PR campaign. But what it got was a detailed report identifying the problems and offering real, concrete, achievable solutions. As was so often the problem, the refs weren’t getting paid anything so they were all working for the league in their spare time. There were few if any continuous improvement and educational programs in place. The list went on and on. In early March, just before teams reported for training camps, the committee met in New York City and held a press conference to announce their findings and present the new changes that the league had agreed to implement beginning with the 2020 season. It would take time, everybody knew, but it was another positive step in the right direction. Ashlyn, along with Christine Nairn, Alex Morgan and Cheyna Williams represented the current league players that had been on the committee. They were front and center at the press conference and tasked with making sure all the current players understood what they were trying to do and supported the effort any way they could.

Ashlyn hadn’t planned on spending time during her offseason doing anything other than being with her wife and son. But she recognized how important the issue was to the long-term success of the league and felt like she couldn’t sit that one out. She had Ali’s blessing and a lot of her advice on keeping things productive during the conference calls and meetings as well. The keeper was able to do almost all of it from home, only travelling three times, including the big press conference in NYC in March. But Ali and Drew had gone with her for that one, visiting Kyle and Nathan at the same time. For the most part, Ashlyn took care of her baby boy and loved every second of it. Finally, after coming and going so often during the first five months of his life, once November rolled around she did nothing but stay. They couldn’t have planned it better if they had tried. As Ali transitioned into working more from home and then, ultimately in December, going back to work full time and spending part of every day at the office in Cambridge, Ashlyn became the stay at home mom.

There were some hitches as the two women learned how to make that transition work. Up to that point, Ali had made all of the scheduling decisions for Drew. Well, honestly, Drew made most of
them for himself – he ate when he was hungry and slept when he was tired and everything else was just extra. But as he started sleeping longer at night, Ali was the one who tweaked and adjusted his schedule. She never discussed it with Ashlyn first because the blonde wasn’t there as much or as involved as much in the minutiae of every hour of every day. She happily fed him whenever she was home, sometimes before training in the morning and usually after training in the afternoon. And she loved giving him a bath and putting him to bed. They both loved that and they actually did it together more often than not. But November was new territory for them and they both struggled a bit at first. The keeper was hesitant to make a change without Ali’s permission. And Ali had a hard time letting go of the full responsibility of scheduling the feeding and sleeping for her baby boy.

“Jesus Christ Ashlyn, if you’re going to do it, then fucking do it. I never know if he’s going to be fed or not when I come downstairs...” Ali ranted as she picked up her crying son from his spot on their bed and carried him to the nearby glider to nurse him.

He had just woken up from his afternoon nap and Ashlyn had waited fifteen minutes to feed him, thinking that her wife was going to come down and breastfeed him. He had just started to cry and before the blonde could bring him downstairs to warm up a bottle of breastmilk, Ali had come marching down the hallway with a pissed off look on her face.

Ashlyn bit her tongue as the brunette bitched her out. She knew it was hard for her to be working from home and spending less time with Drew. Sometimes the keeper wondered if it would have been easier for all of them if she had just gone back to work at the office in Cambridge. It seemed like a kind of torture to be up at her desk on the third floor, knowing her baby was just downstairs, but forcing herself to stay focused on her job and business responsibilities. November was also the month they started him on solid foods, so his schedule changed a little bit too which was new and uncomfortable for Ali. That had been planned out in advance though. It’s not like Ashlyn just all of a sudden started feeding him his baby cereal on a whim. But he was adorable as he tried to figure out how to eat the mushy stuff off of the tiny little spoon. They had both melted as they watched him learn that grabbing it with his hand was not the best way to do it. It felt interesting and new but it did not fill his belly.

They were also both getting used to having the house all to themselves. Whitney and Ryan were on their honeymoon for the first two weeks of the month and wouldn’t be coming back to the big old house until January. That’s when the newlyweds would be officially moving to the house in Cambridge that they were subletting for the next two years. Add to that list of changes the extra stress of the holidays that were fast approaching and it was easy to see why both Ali and Ashlyn were a bit edgy the first couple of weeks in November.

“I was just going to take him down and give him a bottle...” she started innocently, trying to avoid the tinder box and keep it from sparking up.

“Well if he’s crying like this then you’re taking too long” she snapped. “None of this is new. After he naps he needs to eat...”

“Al, I know, I just thought...” she was trying so hard to be patient but the brunette wouldn’t let her get a word in edgewise.

“What? That he’d eat better and be happier if you made him wait so long he got upset? Come on, use your head.” Ali had just gotten him in front of her nipple but he hadn’t stopped crying yet to latch on. Drew’s face was red and angry as he wailed. “Shhh, it’s ok baby boy, I’m here now, your mama just wasn’t thinking...”

“Don’t do that” Ashlyn said sharply as she stood near the foot of the bed, about six feet in front of
her wife and baby. She had Drew’s favorite soft stuffed toy octopus in one hand and a small board book about dogs in the other. Her voice was stern. “Don’t ever do that.”

“Do what?” Ali moved her eyes from Drew up to her wife and looked at her like she was crazy.

Drew finally registered his favorite thing in his life right in front of his face and eagerly latched on. He was aggressive as he took her nipple in his mouth and Ali winced in pain as he began to feed.

“Don’t apologize for me to our son.”

“What are you even talking about? You’re being ridiculous.”

Ali didn’t mean to be so dismissive, she honestly didn’t understand what her wife had meant. But her words came out as bitchy as anything she had ever said to the keeper and she felt bad as soon as she heard them move across the room.

“Don’t tell him I fucked up. Don’t make excuses for something I did or didn’t do just because you don’t agree” the keeper was angry and hurt and tired of tiptoeing around her controlling wife. “Not everything has to be exactly the way Ali Krieger wants it to be. Sometimes, just every once in a while, something I do can be ok enough too.” She paused for a few seconds and tried to get control of her mouth before it caused any more trouble. But she couldn’t. “Why don’t you try telling him that sometime instead of always telling him how silly I’m being or how I’ll do it better next time. You telling him I’m a fuck-up doesn’t help anything. It’ll just make it harder for him to trust anything I’ll ever do. But I’m sure you already know that right? Are you so afraid that I might be able to take care of him too that you have to put me down to him? Great parenting job.”

Ashlyn stormed out of the room and went down the front stairs, still carrying the octopus and book. The gentle jingle of the soft bells in one of the octopus’ legs sounded incongruous with her hard and heavy footsteps pounding down the stairs. Ali heard her whistle for the dogs and then she heard the mudroom door slam. She sat there in the strange quiet and fed her baby while her mind raced around what the blonde had said. Did she do what Ashlyn had said? She knew she could be rigid about things sometimes but she hadn’t felt like she had done that with Drew. She had allowed all sorts of people to help her take care of their baby that summer and fall and she had tried very hard not to be hyper-critical with any of them. As long as Drew wasn’t being harmed by whatever new or awkward technique they were doing, she let it go. She had to remind almost everybody to make sure he was more upright when they fed him a bottle, but Ashlyn often beat her to it, speaking up before Ali had a chance. The brunette had snapped at Kyle once for letting Persey lick the baby’s face. And she had argued with her mother about how much ointment to use for one of his bouts of diaper rash back in August. Deb thought they were using too much and Ali asked her to just do it their way, and then called her mom on it when she kept doing it her way. But that was it. For an entire five months and with as many as nine different ‘care-givers’ staying at the house and helping, she had only lost her cool twice - with Kyle and Deb.

The quiet gurgling and breathing sounds that Drew made as he nursed had already started to calm her down as she sat there and rocked with him. She took a couple of deep breaths and tried to center herself. She smiled at her baby boy and told him what a good job he was doing. But her thoughts went back to the fight she had just had with the blonde. ‘Your mama just wasn’t thinking’ was what she had said to Drew. It was wrong because she knew that Ashlyn had definitely been thinking, but she didn’t know about what because she hadn’t given her a chance to explain. She sighed heavily and regretted her bad mood, short temper and impatience. But were those words bad to say in the way they represented the keeper? Ali didn’t really think so, but she wanted to think more about it. She thought Ashlyn was a wonderful mother and loved the way she cared for their son. They often did things differently when it came to him but neither of them thought one way
was better or worse than the other. How had the blonde heard so much criticism in such simple, harmless words?

It was a couple of hours later when Ashlyn returned from the beach with the dogs. During the ‘season’, from May 1st to October 1st, dogs weren’t allowed on the beach. But after the ‘season’ you could take them there as long as you cleaned up after them. She rinsed them both off with the outdoor hose and chatted for a few minutes with the two oldest Donaldson kids who were playing in their driveway as she dried them off. She had stormed out of the house without her phone and wasn’t wearing a watch so she had no idea what time it was. She knew she had left the house just before 3pm because Drew had woken up from his nap at 2:30pm. Based on the sun, she was guessing it was close to 5pm and she wanted to get home so she could help feed Drew his dinner at 5:30pm. They were trying to eat dinner together as a family, even though it seemed silly to do it at such a young age. Ali had read two different articles about how it’s never too soon to start establishing that healthy ritual. Ashlyn said goodbye to the neighbors and ushered the dogs into the mudroom, feeding them their dinner and giving them some more pats as they started to feast. She sighed heavily as she took her sneakers off and washed her hands in the bathroom sink. The keeper felt strongly about what she had said and didn’t regret saying it. But she wished she had been able to find a better time and maybe a better way to have that conversation with her wife. She never wanted to fight with Ali in front of their kids. That was never good for anybody. She was a firm believer in presenting a unified front to the children, no matter what. She and Ali could work out their differences in private and then come to a decision they both could live with before bringing that back to the kids. As with most of the important things they had come across in their life together, both women were in agreement on this. Which means, even though Drew was just over 5 months old, they had both just messed that up. She was sure it wouldn’t be the last time either. Parenting was hard.

“Hey” Ali said softly, leaning against the open door of the bathroom and making her wife jump.

“Shit, you scared me” Ashlyn chuckled nervously as she dried her hands and turned to face the brunette.

“I’m sorry” she spoke quietly and sincerely as she searched her keeper’s face to try and see how upset she still might be.

“I’m sorry too.”

Ashlyn’s face was still serious and she managed only a half-smile. She also hadn’t moved to touch or hug Ali, even though there were only a couple of feet between them. Neither of those things were good signs and the brunette knew they had a ways to go before this was behind them.

“Can we talk, later tonight?” she asked hopefully, pulling on her fingers as she stood up straight.

“Yes” Ashlyn nodded and gave her another half-smile. “Is he asleep?”

“Mmmm Hmmm. I’ll wake him up in a few minutes so we can have dinnertime” she paused as she took a step back, away from the bathroom. “If that’s ok?”

Ashlyn closed her eyes and blew out an exasperated breath.

“Of course it’s ok. That’s the schedule he’s on Al.” She shook her head as she looked at the brunette. “Let’s not make this into something bigger than it already is. Don’t rethink everything we’re doing because of one fight.”

“You’re right” Ali replied sadly. She had a habit of doing that when she felt guilty or thought she
was at fault in a situation. She got in her head about it and started feeling and acting weird which only made things worse. She had done the same thing when she rescheduled their honeymoon without consulting Ashlyn and a dozen other times in between. They had now gotten to the point in their relationship where Ashlyn would identify it in an effort to stop it from happening. “Sorry” she said and was about to retreat upstairs but the dogs finished eating their dinners and came over to greet her.

Ashlyn took advantage of the distraction to move past the dogs and her wife and go back through the mudroom to the kitchen. They had a highchair on wheels that they pulled up to the small kitchen table when they were feeding him his meals now that they had started adding some solid food to his diet. It was a gradual process to get him used to eating and swallowing something other than breastmilk. They found it easier to feed him in the kitchen because he made quite a mess and the clean-up was faster and easier in that location. The keeper got everything ready for Drew’s dinner and made sure the highchair and tray were clean and in position. Ali brought him downstairs a few minutes later and he was super snuggly having just woken up from his nap. She smiled as she walked over to the blonde so she could see the baby nestled up under her chin, fighting to join the conscious world. As they stood close together, Ashlyn saw a tiny smile spread across his adorable face and she couldn’t help but grin herself. Ali noted with a small sigh that no dimple appeared on her wife’s face where normally it would have.

They sat together at the table and fed him his baby cereal, Ali watching and cheering as Ashlyn did the honors. They also ate their own dinner, as best they could. Ali was able to eat while Ashlyn fed him and then Ashlyn ate once he was finished. The brunette took him into the living room for a little playtime while Ashlyn cleaned up the kitchen. He was at the stage where he was ready to explore more things and was eager to touch everything he saw. And if he did get his hands on something it immediately went into his mouth. He could sit up by himself, unless he was really tired, and hold his head up without any trouble. That evening he wanted to grab Fred and Ali spent some time trying to teach him to touch the doggie and be gentle. All Fred did was roll over like the ham he was and give them his belly to rub. Ali smiled at the friendly, lazy dog and then laughed when Drew started to giggle.

“I’ll get his bath ready” Ashlyn said from the doorway to the mudroom, grinning at the cute scene on the floor.

“Oh, I’ll bring him up in a few minutes” Ali replied, smiling hesitantly and hoping to catch the blonde’s eye.

But Ashlyn didn’t look up. She took a picture on her phone and went back through the kitchen to use the backstairs so she wouldn’t make Fred get up and follow her.

As she closed the hallway bathroom door on her wife and son happily splashing away in the baby tub on the vanity, Ali had an idea. She had about an hour before she would need to nurse Drew, or pump, and she went upstairs to the office, closed the door and took out her phone.

“Do you want to feed him tonight?” she asked an hour later as she watched the keeper putting his little pajamas on him.

“No, Al, you should nurse him like you normally would” she replied and gave her wife a frustrated look.

They had decided when they made up the latest schedule for Drew, that when Ali went back to work she would need and want to spend more time with him and nursing him at night before putting him to bed had been an easy place to make sure that happened. Especially for the next four months while Ashlyn was going to be home with him during the day. They would re-evaluate in
March.

“I just thought...”

“I know you’re trying to be nice but you’re just making it weird.”

“I would like you to feed him tonight, please” Ali said decisively and evenly. She felt guilty and wanted to make sure her wife had another chance to give him a bottle. “I’ll go warm a bottle and bring it up for you.”

When Ashlyn finally came down the backstairs just after 8pm Ali was leaning against the kitchen counter next to the fridge eating leftover chicken right from the container. She was breaking one of her own rules.

“Busted” the keeper chuckled as she put the empty bottle in the sink and then walked over to her wife and opened her mouth. “I want some.”

Ali laughed and put the forkful into the blonde’s mouth and felt immense relief as they looked at each other in the close space. Ashlyn looked happy and relaxed and everything was normal again for a minute. But then, in the next second, the keeper backed up and looked away, almost as if she had forgotten she was mad at her wife and then just remembered. The brunette offered her another forkful but she shook her head and opened the fridge instead.

“Here, I’m done” Ali stood up and handed the container with the fork still in it to the blonde. “Eat the chicken Ash.”

It was hard to eat at the same time Drew did so they were often in this position, scavenging leftovers out of the fridge or warming up plates after he was down for the night.

“Thanks.”

“I’ll be in here when you’re ready” Ali said and walked towards the couch in the family room.

It was odd how it had come to be, but the family room, and the couch in particular, had turned into the place they usually had their hard conversations. Not all of them, certainly, and not usually when other people were with them in the house. But that night, for example, they both just knew they would talk, facing each other on the couch in the family room. Just as they had done after the Super Bowl when Ali finally confessed her feelings to the blonde and they exchanged their very first ‘I love you’s’, Ali would sit with her body turned to face the windows and Ashlyn would sit opposite her, facing the fireplace and the kitchen beyond. There was something about that space that felt important to both of them. And it gradually made sense why that was the room they gravitated to and chose to make ‘Christmas Central’ in their home. That was their safe spot, their oasis.

“I’m sorry Al...”

“I’m really sorry honey...”

They both started at the same time. They looked at each other for a minute and then Ashlyn nodded her head at the brunette.

“First of all, I’m sorry I was such a bitch. I was in a bad mood and I totally took it out on you and I’m really sorry.” Ali chewed her bottom lip and pulled nervously at her fingers in her lap as she spoke.
And I’m sorry I yelled at you like that” Ashlyn shook her head and met her wife’s eyes. “You didn’t deservethat and I said things that were out of line...”

“No you didn’t” Ali interrupted her. “We should have found a better way to talk about it, but you said what you were feeling and nothing was out of line. Except maybe the parenting crack at the end, but I kind of deserved that” she looked down and took a breath.

“I’m sorry I had a tantrum and threw that all at you like that” the blonde continued, “but I’m glad I finally said it I guess. Except I know you don’t try to make me look bad to him on purpose. That was a dumb thing to say and I’m sorry.”

“Do you really think that I feel that way about you?” Ali’s voice was almost a whisper as she asked the thing that scared her the most. “That I don’t think you do anything right or don’t take care of Drew well enough?”

Ashlyn didn’t answer for a long couple of minutes, looking down at her hands as they picked at the beginnings of a small hole in her joggers. Ali finally reached over and took one of her hands and squeezed it.

“Please tell me I’m not that terrible a wife that you actually think that” her voice was still quiet but there was an edge of desperation to it that she couldn’t hide.

“No, I know you don’t really think that” Ashlyn replied, urged on by the pain in the brunette’s voice. “But sometimes, sometimes I know you wish I’d do things differently.”

Ali closed her eyes and let the tiny bit of relief wash over her.

“Honey, I wish I did things differently half the time when it comes to the baby” Ali smiled ruefully and squeezed Ashlyn’s hand so she would look up at her. “Honestly, I think you’re a great mom and I trust you completely when it comes to Drew.” She met her wife’s worried eyes and smiled. “I really mean it. And I need you to believe me because it’s important Ash.”

“I waited to feed him because I thought you might want to because you had been working for most of the day. I was trying to be nice and...”

“And I came in like the Wicked Witch of the West and criticized you and basically called you an idiot” Ali couldn’t help the tears that started falling silently down her cheeks as she summarized her bad behavior. “God, I’m so sorry Ashlyn.”

The blonde squeezed her hand but didn’t hug her or say anything for a few minutes as they sat there.

“Do you really think I can take care of him?” she finally asked. “And don’t just say yes because you know that’s what I want to hear. Think about it and tell me the truth.”

“I don’t have to think about it” Ali looked her in the eye after wiping her tears away. “I know you can take care of him sweetheart. I’ve never doubted it for a second and I never will.” She took a deep breath. “And I’m so sorry if I ever made you doubt yourself. That’s the last thing I want to do. Maybe, some of my own self-doubt comes out or something and you think it’s meant for you. But it’s not Ash, I swear.”

It was Ashlyn’s turn to feel relieved. She believed every word her wife had said and her words filled her with pride and love along with relief.

“Thank you baby” she choked out as her emotions swirled. She pulled Ali into a hug and they
stayed close for a few minutes, just breathing and holding each other. “I know everything is changing right now and I think it’s scary for both of us” she began as they sat up again and Ali scooted closer and put her legs across her wife’s lap, still holding her hand. “You’re going back to work, Whit’s moving out, Drew’s starting to eat solids, Thanksgiving is in a couple of weeks...”

“I know” Ali agreed and put her head on her keeper’s shoulder. “And then it’ll be Christmas. How did it go from May to December so fucking fast?”

They sat there for several minutes, each woman trying to find a way to make the final step past the hurt from earlier in the day.

“I think I doubt myself a little bit” Ashlyn’s voice was so quiet Ali could barely hear it. “And then I hear something you say and I twist it around in my head and make it about me. Like you said it in a bad way when you didn’t really mean it that way at all.” She took a deep breath and her words were a little louder. “I’m sorry I’m insecure and sensitive about it. I’ll work on it.”

“I know I can be tough to live with sometimes” Ali began. “I like things a certain way and that’s not going to change anytime soon, unfortunately.”

“Your mom says you’ve been like that your whole life” Ashlyn agreed and gave her wife a squeeze. “I don’t need you to change honey.”

“I’ve been trying to be more relaxed about things and I really thought I had done a good job this summer, with the baby especially...”

“Oh my God, you were so great Al. Between our moms and everybody else coming to help, really, you’ve been great so don’t think you weren’t because it’s just not true.”

“Well, I thought about it a lot after you left and I was pretty good. The only people I snapped at were my brother and my mom. And, of course, the person I snapped at the most was you.” She leaned up and kissed the blonde’s jaw softly. “You get the unfiltered me and sometimes that sucks. I’m sorry babe.”

“I was talking to my brother the other day about being the ‘other parent’, you know, the one not breastfeeding and running the show 24/7.”

“Ok, and what did Chris say?”

“He said that we’re just always wrong. We’re the ones who screwed up, no matter what and to just get used to it and try and be as helpful as possible.”

“Well that’s not true at all!” Ali said, sitting up so she could look at her wife. “I guess, maybe in Chris’ case it might be true” she chuckled and rolled her eyes. “But definitely not true in our case. So don’t you believe it. I’m right a lot, but so are you and just because your ideas or methods are different than mine doesn’t make them any better or worse.”

“That’s not what you said when I suggested we let the dogs lick Drew clean last week” the keeper quirked her eyebrow at the brunette.

“Stop” Ali laughed and playfully slapped her keeper’s chest. “You know exactly what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do.” Ashlyn leaned over and pecked her on the lips.

They snuggled for a few minutes more and then the keeper asked another question that she had been wondering about for the past week.
“Is it hard working from home with him right here?” she pressed her lips into the top of Ali’s head and kept them there for a few seconds.

“Ugh, it’s awful” the brunette replied with a groan. “But then it’s easier to get a little fix if I really need one. So it’s good and bad I guess.” She sighed. “It’s always hard. That’s what everybody says and I’ve read a million stories about it. We just have to get through it.”

Ashlyn leaned down and kissed her wife’s lips slowly and softly.

“I love you” she murmured against them and then kissed Ali again.

“I love you too. Thank you for putting up with all my crap.”

“And thank you for putting up with mine” the blonde smiled and sighed as Ali squeezed her tightly. “So how do we keep this from happening again? I mean the specific feeding thing that caused all this trouble in the first place.”

“I talked to my mom and she...”

“You called your mom about this?” Ashlyn looked at the brunette with surprise.

“I did” Ali met her eyes. “While you were giving him his bath. Was I not supposed to or something?”

“I don’t know, I just thought we’d try and figure it out on our own first at least” Ashlyn chuckled. “What’d Deb say?”

“Well I didn’t give her specifics if that’s what you’re worried about” Ali added with a quirk of her eyebrow. “Neither one of us comes out looking very good in this one.”

“Very true” the blonde nodded.

“I just figured she lived with us for almost three months and she knows us better than almost anyone. God, that’s a little worrisome...”

“Al, what did she say?”

“Oh, yeah, she said we need a schedule that we can stick to so there are no more miscommunications like today.”

“He already has a schedule...”

“No, you and I have to plan ahead for things like whether I want to nurse him or whether you’re going to give him a bottle. Like, if I wanted to nurse him this afternoon I should have told you while he was napping so you could have just brought him up to me instead of wondering about it and trying to be nice and then we have a problem and an upset baby.”

“Or I could have asked you while he was napping if you wanted to” Ashlyn countered. “It works both ways.”

“It does indeed” Ali agreed and squeezed her wife again, happy to have this most recent upset behind them. “And, for the record, I appreciate you trying to be nice. I truly do. But going forward, just take care of him. I love that you’re so thoughtful babe, you know I do. But just feed him next time, ok?”

“Ok baby.”
They stayed on the couch for a while longer, neither wanting to make the effort to go upstairs to bed despite being exhausted. They held each other and enjoyed the stillness and the warmth from their bodies. Both women thought they were above average at communicating with each other, normally, and were genuinely surprised that this latest skirmish could be traced back to simple communication. There was always so much to learn as they lived their beautiful life with their sweet baby boy in the big old house. And so much to fuck up.
Learning to Make Time

The rest of November raced by as Ali got better about working from her office in the big old house and Ashlyn got better about taking care of baby Drew. The people closest to them could see the change happening, the confidence growing in both of them as the weeks slipped by. The keeper loved her time with the baby and the bond between them grew even stronger. The brunette got caught up on everything at Knight-Harris so she could make a seamless transition back to being full-time managing partner at the beginning of December. And the new family got used to having the house to themselves and finding time to enjoy it and each other too. One of their favorite things to do was to go for a walk together. One of them would push Drew in his stroller and the other would walk the dogs on their leashes as they toured the neighborhood. If it wasn’t too cold they would walk down to the beach and let the dogs run for a while too. Drew almost always fell asleep before they were finished and they had to learn how to plan those walks accordingly. Ali couldn’t believe how happy those walks made her. It felt like all her dreams had come true and she couldn’t wish for one more thing. As the days got colder and darker it was harder to find the time for their afternoon strolls. But they both knew that was something they would start up again as soon as the New England seasons would allow.

Ashlyn’s social media posts increasingly focused on her adorable son and a lot of her fans balked at the new content. Most of them welcomed it and enjoyed the look into the keeper’s private life. The brunette had to warn her about being careful with the pictures and videos she posted for all the world to see. It was a sad thing to have to take into consideration, but there were people out there who would take any chance you gave them to rip you off or steal your identity. And then there were the people who were just crazy ass fans that didn’t know where to draw the line. Ashlyn had never thought about it in that way before. She never really considered what was in the background of her pictures and videos. But after she read the information her wife had given her on mistakes other celebrities, minor and major, had made, she promised to be more careful. Starting with – don’t show people the street number on your mailbox when you go down to get the mail and Drew does something cute with the little flag on the side of it. Don’t show the street sign at the end of your street. Don’t show your half-naked wife walking through the bedroom as she’s getting ready for work in the morning, no matter how adorable the baby looks on your lap as you sit on the bed and play with him. Be careful of the pictures on display behind him and anything else that might be laying around, like a toy that might not have been washed and put away yet after being used the night before. Ali finally just said their bedroom was off-limits for anything public, unless she approved it. The keeper didn’t have a leg to stand on and had to comply with the new rule. She knew Ali was right and they were both a little afraid of coming home and finding some crazy fan sitting on their front porch waiting for them. Ashlyn was more popular than ever and she had to start being more responsible about her family’s privacy and safety.

Thanksgiving was at Ken and Vicki’s house that year and Drew enjoyed his first big official family holiday. He had only been five weeks old for the 4th of July so that one didn’t count. They dressed him up in the smallest shark costume Ashlyn could find for Halloween. All three of them answered the door for the trick or treaters right after dinner and he smiled and giggled his way through it for almost an hour before he got bored and tired. The shark costume picture that Ali posted on her social media, which was all still private, got twice as many comments and likes from her family and friends and colleagues as any of the other pictures she posted. Even the adorable monthly progress pictures they took with him dressed in a cute outfit as he grew month by month paled in comparison. But the picture they took that Thanksgiving in Ken’s living room with the entire extended Krieger family and Kyle and Nathan was one of Ashlyn’s absolute favorites. What separated it from so many of the other nice pictures they had taken was the look on her beautiful wife’s face. Ali stood next to Ashlyn who was holding Drew in her arms, facing forward. The
brunette was standing sideways with an arm behind Ashlyn’s back and her other arm resting on the keeper’s arm in front of Drew. Drew clutched Ali’s finger and had a huge smile on his face, mouth open and eyes shimmering as he laughed. Ali had looked down at him just before the timer went off on the camera and her smile was the most beautiful thing Ashlyn had ever seen. She simply glowed with love for her baby boy. That picture wasn’t the one most of the family used when they posted to their different social media but it was the one that Ashlyn had Kyle send to her so she could print off a small copy and keep it with her always.

Just as they were starting to feel like the queens of raising a six-month old baby, Drew’s first big challenge hit them. He started teething at the end of November and it caused havoc for about three weeks. He started drooling like a monster and even developed a rash on his chin from being so wet and drooly all the time. He started waking up at night from the pain and didn’t even want to nurse. All he wanted was relief. All the moms in their life chimed in with tried and true remedies and most of them worked. The old-fashioned frozen washcloth method would probably have been the most effective, except that there were several different types of teething rings you could buy now that did the trick too. Drew liked his icy cold and Ashlyn swore she could see his eyes roll back up in his head as he closed them and gnawed on the frozen plastic shapes. By the end of the three weeks, in mid-December, their boy had his first two teeth, his bottom two incisors came in a week apart.

Ali remembered Sydney’s warning about breastfeeding once the baby had teeth as she held one of Drew’s frozen teething rings against her sore right nipple and winced from the pain and the cold.

“Hey sugar plum, what’s going on in here?” Ashlyn did a double-take as she entered the kitchen and saw her wife leaning against the counter next to the fridge. Her nursing top and bra were open and she was holding her breast up with one hand and applying the teething ring with the other.

“Are you ok honey?”

“Yeah” she sighed and met her wife’s concerned eyes as the blonde came to stand in front of her. “He just nipped me a little but it fucking kills” she chuckled and looked back at her breast. “He only does it when he’s finished. It’s like he wants one more suck or something. I’ve been pretty good about getting my finger in the corner of his mouth so he just gums that. But he beat me to it tonight.”

“Well, I’ll have a talk with him about that in the morning” Ashlyn said seriously, making Ali laugh out loud and grin. She kissed the brunette’s lips and squeezed her hips. “I’m sorry Al, that really sucks. I understand the benefits of breastfeeding and breastmilk and I love that you’re doing this for him but whenever you’ve had enough, you know, I mean, it’s your call on when to stop.” She looked Ali in the eye and cupped her cheek. “I know you know that,” she sighed, frustrated at her inability to say what she was trying to say, “I’m just saying that I won’t think any less of you if you decide to stop breastfeeding him. You can keep pumping and we can just use more bottles too if you want...”

“I know what you’re trying to say babe, thank you.” Ali leaned forward and kissed the blonde, letting her lips linger for a minute. “Let’s just see how it goes. It’s the top ones I’m afraid of” she chuckled again. “At least his tongue blocks most of the danger from the bottom teeth.”

“Well, if you need me to kiss that and make it better you just let me know” the keeper smirked and moved her mouth towards Ali’s exposed breast.

“Yeah, you just try it and see what happens” the brunette challenged with a quirk of her eyebrow and a short giggle. She pushed her wife’s face away from her breast and then squealed when Ashlyn moved her hands down and grabbed her ass. “Stop” she laughed and squirmed in her wife’s arms.
“If you want me to take your mind of it I’m available for that too” she wagged her eyebrows and grinned at Ali before placing a sweet kiss on her cheek.

“Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind” she smiled shyly at the blonde and gave her a quick peck. “Ask me again in about an hour and we’ll see.”

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December in the big old house was busier than it had ever been that year. In addition to all the regular holiday decorating and baking and gift buying and Christmas card sending, the young Krieger family introduced Drew to everything the season had to offer. They tried to be smart about it though. Ashlyn brought him to the mall and met Ali for a short shopping trip so the brunette could stay longer and get much more accomplished after Ashlyn took Drew back home. Ashlyn had the great idea of visiting Santa in the mall with the Dwyers and the Crosses and then going to a loud and messy early lunch at one of the kid-friendly restaurants nearby. It was a train-wreck but the very best kind. All six adults knew what they were in for and were ready willing and able to help keep the children entertained and happy. Molly was about five months pregnant and looking beautiful and feeling great. During one of the quieter moments as they discussed the idea of how much having the second child would change things, Ali looked at her wife and saw the sparkle in her eye. Ashlyn felt her eyes and met them with a bashful smile. Ali nodded at her and smiled back warmly.

“To tell you the truth” the blonde began hesitantly, “We’re going to start trying to get pregnant again next year...”

“What?!” Sydney’s head whipped around.

“You are?!” Niki asked with a surprised look on her face.

“That’s awesome!” Dom chimed in with a grin.

“Oh I hope one of us has a baby girl soon!” Molly squealed with excitement.

Sydney stared at her best friend across the table and Ali knew she would have to apologize later for keeping it from her. She hadn’t planned it to come out this way. She thought she would tell Sydney first and then some group situation like this might happen. But the look on Ashlyn’s face was just so sweet and eager that she couldn’t resist.

“Who’s carrying this time?” Molly asked as she held Drew on her lap and bounced him on her knee.

“Me again” Ali said with a smile. “My choice. Don’t look at her like that” she said directly to Sydney who had given the keeper a withering look.

“But you’re just getting back from this one” Sydney’s face was full of concern. “Isn’t that a little soon?”

Ordinarily the criticism would have pissed both Ali and Ashlyn off, but they knew her only concern was her best friend’s well-being.

“We both are really close in age to our brothers and we want that for Drew too” Ali explained patiently.

“That’s right” Niki nodded. “Chris is only a year older than you.”
“Yep” Ashlyn agreed. “And it’s the same with Kyle and Ali.”

“I think that’s wonderful news, really, just great” Dom leaned over and gave Ali a hug from the seat next to her. “If you could please have a little girl that would be terrific. That way Cash can marry into your amazing family no matter what he’s into” the Brit chuckled and everybody else laughed along with him.

Sydney got up, put Cash down and watched him lurch off after Noah towards the ball pit a few feet away from their table. Niki and Ashlyn both stood up and followed.

“I got him Syd” the blonde said with a grin.

“I’m going to the ladies room” Sydney said and walked the other direction.

Ali looked at Dom with pleading eyes, silently asking for information. He smiled ruefully before speaking.

“You’ll have to ask her” he nodded after his wife.

The brunette opened the ladies room door and stood there waiting for Sydney to come out of the stall. She had to pee too but she didn’t want to risk the coach leaving before she talked with her. She would do that too, even if Ali asked her to wait, if she was pissed off.

“I’m a big girl. I can go to the bathroom and make it back to the table all by myself you know” Sydney teased as she washed her hands.

“Will you talk to me boo? What’s going on?”

“Not in here” she made a stinky face, dried her hands and left the bathroom as two other moms came in with four little girls.

The two women sat in Ali’s truck with the engine running and the heat on. Sydney texted Dom so nobody would worry about them and they promised not to be too long.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you first” Ali started as she turned sideways in the driver’s seat to face the coach. “We hadn’t planned on telling anybody anything until next year...”

“But then we had that conversation about having a second kid” Sydney nodded and looked straight ahead, out the windshield of the truck. “I get it.”

Sydney always knew things before everybody else so this was a first for them in 29 years of friendship. In addition to the surprise announcement, it had been a rough couple of months for the two besties. Ali had been busy with work and Drew and the holidays and their weekly get-togethers had been anything but regular. As close as they had been all summer long, once Sydney had gone back to work in September for the new school year, they hadn’t seen very much of each other. The coach knew how hard it was to adjust to being a new mom and going back to work so she had been very patient. But aside from the spa day at Whitney’s wedding at the end of October, they really hadn’t spent that much time together. They had pushed off their November nights together until they had finally squeezed in one late afternoon coffee on Ali’s way home from the city after spending some time at the Cambridge office. Then they hadn’t seen each other until Thanksgiving night in Ipswich. The next visit hadn’t been until this very day, which Sydney had arranged. They would see each other next Sunday at Noah’s 4th birthday party and then the Sunday after that at Drew’s christening on December 22nd. But it just wasn’t enough. And what was worse was that it didn’t feel like Ali was even trying. Sydney knew she was. The coach’s brain told her so every time her feelings got hurt, but her heart said something different.
“I wish we could go back to the summer again” Ali said wistfully and looked down, nervously playing with the strap of her purse in her lap.

“Yeah” Sydney agreed, still looking forward. “It was easy then.”

It slowly dawned on the brunette that her best friend was mad about a lot more than just getting this news at the same time as Niki and Molly. Ali tried to think what else she had done that could have pissed her off. She wracked her brain but couldn’t come up with anything. They had a great time at Cash’s birthday party in September. Then they had one of their best weekends ever at Whitney’s wedding, even though Sydney had only stayed one night and flown down and back with Kristie Mewis. Now that she thought about it, the coach had spent much more time with Kristie that weekend than she had with her. Ali felt her frustration start to build. They hadn’t seen each other much in November so how could she have pissed her off then? What was she missing? Maybe something was going on at work or something. Maybe she was having some trouble with Dom...or Cash...or her mother... All of a sudden Ali felt like complete shit. How the fuck did she not know what was going on with her best fucking friend? God, she thought back over the few times they had seen each other during the last three months and then recalled several of their abbreviated phone conversations. She realized with a sharp pain in her chest that she often waited hours to reply to a text from Sydney.

“Syd I’m so sorry” her voice was strained and urgent as she tried to rein in her emotions and not fall apart. “I’m sitting here trying to think what I could have done to piss you off and I realized” she paused and swallowed hard, wishing the coach would look at her instead of staring out the windshield, “I haven’t been around enough to piss you off and that’s the fucking problem isn’t it?”

She waited for some sort of reply or response, but when nothing came from the coach she continued.

“I’m so fucking sorry boo. I don’t even know what to say...you know how it is with the baby...”

“I do know what it’s like to have a new baby” she nodded slowly. “But we still saw each other after he was born.”

There was just enough bite behind the words to get under Ali’s skin and she took a deep breath to try and stay calm. She didn’t want to make this fight any worse than it already was, and, based on the cold-shoulder she was still getting, it was pretty bad. But when she heard the aggravated sigh that came from her best friend in the moment she had taken to try and stay calm, she was pissed.

“Well, the reason we saw each other after Cash was born is because I went over to your house all the time to see you” she huffed out angrily.

Sydney raised her eyebrows and turned her head to face the brunette and Ali suddenly wished she had kept her stupid mouth shut. She was going to get it now. This was Sydney’s super pissed off face that she got only when she truly felt put-upon and like she was completely in the right.

“Ok” she shifted in her seat a little bit and quirked an eyebrow at Ali. “And you’re saying the reason we don’t see each other anymore is because I’m not coming to see you. Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yes, that’s what I’m saying Syd and you know it. Quit being a drama queen and just tell me what you’re trying to tell me...”

“Of course, because you don’t have time to even fight with me about how shitty our friendship is now. You’re too busy with your baby and your job and your wife.” The coach was getting worked
up now and would soon be yelling.

“Oh please. I’m sitting here trying to talk to you about this. Don’t make it seem like I don’t give a shit” she snapped back. “And yes, I am busy with all of those things. That’s called life and I’m doing the best I can.”

“Well excuse the fuck out of me” Sydney raised her voice to the next level. “I’m busy with my baby and my husband and my job too Al but that doesn’t matter does it? Did you ever think that it might be harder for me to come and see you now than it was for you to come and see me then? You didn’t have a baby then. And you barely had to work at all either when they were paying you for handing off your leads and your customers at the end of that year.” She shook her head and looked down. “And fuck you for making me say that. It meant everything to me that you made time to come and help me and be with me after he was born. I’ll never forget it as long as I live” she said quietly as tears started to slide down her cheeks.

Ali’s heart broke when she heard everything her best friend said. She had been indignant at first, so sure that she was right about the fault being Sydney’s for not coming to visit her more after the summer ended. She thought back to that time two years ago. Yes, she had been there for Sydney for three months and then she started her MBA program and Gram got sick and passed away. Sydney had been the one who reached out to her and helped her through all of that, even with her new baby and her husband and her job. Cash was five months old when Gram died and Sydney left him at home and flew down to help her best friend get through the funeral and everything that went with it. She had answered any question Ali had for her about every part of being pregnant and giving birth, no matter what time of day or night Ali had texted or called her. And if they compared the time spent together after each of their babies was born, Sydney still came out on top. She had spent three full months, all summer long, hanging out with and helping and encouraging Ali and her newborn son. She didn’t just stop in a couple of afternoons a week either. She spent the whole day at the big old house, several times a week. After the three month comparison, it had been all Sydney after that. She was the one who kept putting the work in on their friendship. The brunette was crushed as she realized what a shitty friend she had been.

“Fuck Syd” she was angry at herself and couldn’t hide it. “I’m such an asshole. I’m sorry boo. I’ve been so wrapped up in...my stuff that I...God I’m such an asshole.” She shook her head and looked down. “I don’t even know what to say? You deserve better and I promise I’ll be better, if you still want me to be?” she asked hesitantly, afraid to look up.

“Of course I do” she replied in a soft voice that Ali could barely hear. She wiped her tears and met the brunette’s eyes for the first time in the thirty minutes they had been sitting in the truck. “I can’t lose you Alibaba, you’re all I’ve got. It’s just you, Dom and my mom. You’re the only one who can keep me sane. I’m always going to need you. Always.” She smiled softly and sadly at Ali, patted her knee and started to get out of the truck. “You just have to figure out if you want to make time for me or not.”

Sydney held the door open for a couple of seconds as she watched Ali’s face crumble into a pained frown and then burst into tears. She shut the door and walked through the parking lot and back into the restaurant without looking back. Ali buried her face in her hands and sobbed for a long time. She wasn’t even sure how much time had gone by but two middle-aged women shook her from her misery when they knocked on the window of the truck and made her jump a mile.

“Are you alright? Is anything the matter?” they asked through the glass, trying to be helpful.

Ali turned to face them and waved.

“I’m fine. Thank you for checking.”
She took a few minutes to pull herself together and fix her face after crying so much. She didn’t love the reflection she saw. She had work to do to fix things with her best friend. And she knew that if she had done that to Sydney then she must have done something similar to other important people in her life, although probably to a lesser degree. She had to think about it and start making things right.

They turned down several holiday party invitations and spent their evenings at home trying to get things finished before the baby’s Christening the Sunday before Christmas. The only holiday party they attended was the Knight-Harris one they threw the Friday before the christening. Ken and Vicki babysat Drew while Sandi babysat Cash so Sydney and Dom could come too. It was mostly a business party for clients and co-workers and other colleagues they worked with during the year. Dom had advised several of their athletes in both official and unofficial capacities so that was Ali’s excuse for getting the Dwyers on the guest list. Ashlyn never said a word. She knew her wife had been working hard to repair the rift with Sydney and loved how excited the two women were to get dressed up for the party. They sent everybody at K-H home early in the afternoon so they could get changed and then come back for the party that evening. It was a nice, well-attended soiree held in a private room in one of the fancy restaurants along the river near the office. There were hors d’oeuvres and a bar and a DJ and everybody who was there had a very nice time. The company was just big enough to require an official party like that, but not so big that the official party would bankrupt them either. K-H was doing very well and were just about to complete their most profitable year yet and there was much to celebrate.

Ali and Ashlyn both gave speeches. The brunette’s was short and professional but heartfelt at the same time as she thanked everyone for keeping things going while she was out on maternity leave. Many of the clients were stunned to learn that the managing partner had been out for six months and they hadn’t even known about it or felt any decrease in the quality of their services or experiences. It was a testament to the hard work of the rest of the team. She finished by letting everyone know how excited she was to be back full-time and how much she was looking forward to 2020. The keeper’s speech was less professional and more of a ‘I can’t believe where we are compared to where we started’ sort of summary. She spent a lot of time talking about the quality of the people she worked with at the company. She called out people by name for doing the little things that they didn’t think anybody noticed. Ashlyn had relied on Marcy and Jared and Jen for her intel but it was very effective and everybody felt appreciated and respected. And that was the point. You could build a good team or company but if you didn’t make sure to tell your teammates and employees how much you valued them and liked them then it was just a matter of time before they moved on to someplace else.

Hilary was home in Idaho for the NWHL holiday break but they got her on Facetime and she said a few words as well. She was, by far, the least active member of the management team and shareholder group but she was still the premier name on the company and people wanted to hear from her. And just when everybody thought they were done, Ali and Ashlyn made Jared get up and say something too. They both raved about him as they coaxed him to join them at the front of the large room. He was sweet and funny as he thanked the two women for giving him a chance and then trusting him enough to let him help grow the company. He was nervous because his new boyfriend was at the party and the relationship was still pretty new so he didn’t want to say the wrong thing or embarrass himself too much. They closed out the speeches portion of the party by playing a b-roll of video clips from all different clients, agents and employees during the past year. It was hysterical. One of the first things Ali had done when she got back to the office in Cambridge every day in December was to hire another office assistant. Patrick Wong joined the team and worked with the other office assistant, Wendy, to support the five agents at the firm. Ali had also hired the company’s very first, dedicated IT and video/media specialist who would work right there
with them in the office to keep everybody and everything connected and firing on all cylinders. Holly McAfee came highly recommended and had proven her worth almost instantly by putting that video together for the party. She had only been there for a week and it was the first project she had worked on. She hit it out of the park.

Ashlyn and Ali had made plans earlier that summer to fly all of the Harrises up to Gloucester for Christmas that year. The keeper had been wanting to do it since their first perfect Christmas in the house but it was such a big deal in so many ways. Foremost was the expense of the airplane tickets. Ashlyn could afford it, not every Christmas or anything extravagant like that, but they could make it work this year. Then there was the awkwardness between Mike and Carol with poor Tammye stuck in the middle. And then, Beth was eight months pregnant again. They joked that she would only come visit them when she was about to give birth. And of course everybody had tried to say no at first, that it was too expensive and too hard and it would be too much of an imposition on the young parents. Ali had let her wife handle the arrangements for the most part because they were her family. But when the blonde started to get frustrated about everyone’s lack of enthusiasm and general dismissal of the plan, Ali sent out a group text and very bluntly told them to get on board with the plan and quit making it so hard for Ashlyn to finalize the tickets. She told them how important it was to the keeper and that was all it took.

The Harris clan arrived the day after the big Knight-Harris party and Ashlyn rode in with the car service their company used to pick them all up at the airport. It was a busy Saturday on the last weekend before Christmas so traffic was brutal getting through the city. They all sat together in the back of the Mercedes passenger van and caught up on things. Ashlyn couldn’t get over how big Johnny had gotten and it took all the self-control she had not to take him out of the car seat and play with him as they inched along. She felt awful remembering that it had been a full year since she had last seen him. Her mom and dad had come to Portland in October for the championship game but Beth and Chris hadn’t been able to make it. And for the first time in her life, Ashlyn had not visited her family in Florida during the year. She always went to see everybody when the Breakers played the Pride but that year the Orlando game was Memorial Day weekend and the keeper had rushed back because Ali was already past her due date. Ashlyn had a sick feeling in her stomach about it but she knew it had been a series of uncontrollable events that had kept her from visiting her hometown and her family. She knew they understood and would forgive her. She promised herself she wasn’t going to let it happen again. Ali’s dust-up with Sydney had made them both pause and put some perspective back on the other parts of their busy lives. It was a good wake-up call.

As they all stood together, crowded into the mudroom, Ali hugged them all, passing Drew around to the entire riotous clan. He wasn’t teething anymore and was back to being his normal, sweet baby self. Beth came out of the downstairs bathroom, walked through everybody to get to the comfortable recliner in the living room and asked if she could hold the baby. Ashlyn brought him right over to her, knowing it was the first time she and Chris were meeting their godson. The big man stood next to his wife and admired the baby in her arms as she cooed at him and tickled him. Chris couldn’t believe that both he and his sister were parents. How the hell had that happened? He grinned at the baby and then at his sister standing on the other side of the chair. Drew had just woken up from his early afternoon nap and he was hungry.

“Do you want to feed him?” Ashlyn asked, having already checked with her wife and been given the ok. “Ali held him off a few minutes in case one of you hooligans wanted to get in there with him.”

“You don’t have to ask me twice” Beth chuckled as Ali brought in the bottle with a grin.

“Bash, will you help me get his crib set up so he can have a nap?” Chris asked nodding towards
Johnny who was standing in the mudroom with Mike patting the dogs and hugging them as they walked around in circles wagging their tails.

Chris and Beth took the front bedroom, as they had always done whenever they stayed in the house. They set up Johnny’s crib, a portable crib that Ashlyn had bought for Drew but not needed to use very much yet, in Whitney’s room. It was half packed and there were moving boxes in the corner but they knew the 17-month old wouldn’t care. The keeper had checked with her bestie to make sure it was ok if they borrowed her room that week. It was that kind of courtesy and respect that she had always shown Whitney, and the other people she was close to, that endeared her to them for life. Asking if she could borrow a room in her own house for her godson to sleep in was vintage Ashlyn. She tried to put her mom and Carol in the guest room but Tammye insisted that they would take the pull out bed up in Ali’s office. She didn’t want to make Mike feel like he didn’t belong down there or wasn’t welcome or whatever his oversensitive mind would think if he slept alone up on the third floor. Ashlyn saw the flash in her mother’s eyes and knew it was non-negotiable. She felt her own flash of frustration at her father and decided this was the visit she was going to talk to him about it. Enough was enough. So Mike took the guest room, protesting that the pull-out would have been just fine with him, but Ashlyn could tell he was very happy with the guest room. In all fairness, it was his turn. He was usually the one who took the farthest flung room. Even at their wedding he had stayed down at the hotel by the beach instead of at the house.

By the time Nathan drove Kyle, Luna, Deb and Mike Christopher up to the big old house it was just after dinnertime. Ashlyn was giving Drew his bath upstairs and Ali told the newcomers to run up and say hi to the baby before they got too far into the bedtime routine. The brunette got a bunch of leftovers out, she had made a delicious roast in the crock pot and had just finished putting it all away before they arrived. The house was full and humming with excitement. Johnny was still trying his darnedest to use one of the dogs as a body pillow as he lay on the floor of the family room watching ‘The Backyardigans’. He kept trying to lie on top of Persey but she kept getting up and walking away after a couple of minutes. Ali had told him, and his parents sitting on the family room couch behind him, that Fred was definitely his best bet. He was just lazy enough that it might work. Carol and Tammye were sitting in the nook at the back of the family room folding baby clothes and towels and watching Johnny try to maneuver Fred where he wanted him. Mike had been upstairs watching bathtime but he came down the front stairs and stood next to Ali in the kitchen after the newcomers had gone up to say hello.

“How can I help with anything?”

“No thanks Mike” she smiled broadly at him. “I’m just getting dinner warmed up again for them. I want you to do whatever you feel like doing. Just make yourself at home and relax. I promise if I need a hand with something I’ll come get you. Ok?”

“Only if you promise...” he gave her a questioning look.

“I promise” she smiled again and patted his arm.

That night, after the newcomers had eaten dinner and hung around for a couple of hours before heading to Ipswich, Ali and Ashlyn snuggled together in their bed. They were both wiped out but too excited to get to sleep. It was hard to believe that they would be going to church in the morning for Drew’s baptism and christening. They had planned the day way back in July, once Ashlyn was home from her World Cup duties, and it had always seemed so far away. It felt like their baby boy would never be seven months old and the Sunday before Christmas would never come. But now there they were with their house full of loved ones all gathered to celebrate both occasions and they still couldn’t quite believe it.
“I hope he does ok tomorrow” Ashlyn said softly into the top of her wife’s head as she kissed it. Ali was curled into her keeper’s side and she squeezed her and kissed her shoulder as she replied.

“He’ll be fine. Whatever he needs we’ll handle it. Reverend Janet will be cool with whatever happens, you know that” she tried to reassure the blonde. 

They were quiet for a few minutes as they idly caressed each other, waiting for sleep to take them. Ali thought her wife might have managed to fall asleep when she was quiet and still for several minutes.

“I’m so glad we did this Al. Thank you for letting me do this.” Ashlyn’s voice was low and choked with emotion as she spoke. “I didn’t know how bad I wanted this...until now.”

She started to cry and turned her head to the side, away from the brunette. Her emotions were all over the place and she had done a good job keeping them in check up until that very moment. She felt safe in her wife’s arms and when her defenses went down, the tears finally rushed in. She brought her right hand up and wiped some of the tears away, but new ones took their place in a matter of seconds. She moved to sit up and Ali rolled away a bit to let her. The brunette rubbed her back softly and let her have a minute to try and settle down, but that minute just made more tears fall. Ashlyn began to sob and Ali sat up and wrapped herself around her, left arm around her stomach and right arm around her back with her head resting against her shoulder blade.

“It’s ok babe. I’ve got you. Everything’s alright” she cooed as she slowly rubbed her back.

They stayed like that for several minutes until the keeper stopped sobbing and began to catch her breath. She padded to the bathroom and blew her nose three times before coming back to bed.

“I’m sorry, I don’t really know where that came from” she confessed weakly as she hugged her wife who was still sitting up, waiting for her.

“You can say it out loud if you want” Ali said quietly as she held her tightly, chin atop her shoulder.

Based on a few comments Ashlyn had made during the past couple of days, the brunette had a pretty good idea what was making her beautiful wife so sad.

“I...I miss her so much and I’m sad she’s not here for this.” She sniffled but held it together. “She should fucking be here for this. It’s just not fair.”

“I know sweetheart” Ali soothed. “I miss her too. I swear I almost asked you where she was when you walked in today with everybody and I didn’t see her.”

“Really?” Ashlyn pulled back to look at her wife.

“Really. I know it sounds a little silly, but I just always feel her around us and watching over us. It’s like both she and Grandma Lilian are up there taking care of us but still close by.”

“It’s not silly” Ashlyn smiled sadly. “I wish I felt her like that. All I feel is the space where she should be.”
Chapter Notes

I'm so disappointed and frustrated with the USWNT roster announcement that I'm just going to stay in denial for a while and post a whole bunch of chapters. Sigh. Part 4 is now complete and there will be 41 chapters. I'll get them all up this weekend because I have no patience. lol. Part 5 is already being written...

Drew slept through most of the ceremony the next morning and was a champ when he was rudely awakened by Reverend Janet pouring the baptismal water onto his head. He cried out and seemed confused by all the strange faces looking at him. Reverend Janet gave Beth a small towel and she wiped the water from his face as Chris held him and bounced him a little bit. As soon as the reverend poured the second cup of water onto his head he stopped crying and smiled, making everyone in the congregation respond in kind. Ashlyn squeezed her wife’s hand and they both exhaled and grinned from their place in the front row. When the third and final cup of water was poured over his head he giggled and tried to grab it with his chubby little fingers.

“That’s my boy” Ashlyn whispered proudly as everyone laughed along with the adorable baby.

The keeper had done some research into baptisms as they pertained to ships. She knew her Grandpa John hadn’t been a sailor but he was a ship builder and a sailmaker and his whole life had revolved around ships and the sea. And they had named their son after the sea captain who had built their beautiful house and she wanted to try and honor both men somehow. There was a tradition where ship captains would use the ship’s bell to baptized babies born on their ships. The bell would be engraved with the name of every baby baptized with it, along with the name of the ship, of course. Ashlyn spoke with Reverend Janet in November about what she wanted to do and she assured the blonde that using a ship’s bell as the baptismal font that held the holy water would be perfectly fine. Neither she nor the church would have any problem with it. Ali was on board as well. She loved that her wife had found another way to honor her past and the history of the house they had made their home. Ashlyn found an antique brass ship’s bell that was roughly from the same time period that Captain Leighton’s favorite schooner had been built, approximately 1875. It was a simple shape, nothing too fancy or ornate, and it was about 12” tall and 11” wide at the widest diameter at the bottom of the bell. It came with a clapper but the blonde had it shipped loose. She would attach it after the baptism so it wasn’t in the way or making too much noise during the ceremony. Ashlyn had the bell engraved with the name of Captain Leighton’s favorite schooner, and the date it had been completed. It was the last true fishing schooner he had built, the final ships he purchased or commissioned were more for his merchant work. The front of the bell said ‘Mary Sarah’ in large letters, with ‘1875’ below it. The ‘Mary’ was for his beloved wife and the ‘Sarah’ for his favorite daughter. On the opposite side, in smaller letters, right at the bottom of the bell, they engraved ‘Andrew Holatka Krieger - 5/27/2019’ in one long line.

The other tradition they wanted to honor or adopt was to have Drew wear the christening gown Gram had made for Johnny. Ashlyn had talked with Chris and Beth and they thought it was a great idea. They were already planning to use the same gown for their next baby and everyone thought it was a wonderful new family tradition to start. Unfortunately, Johnny had been christened when he was almost four months old. That was a very common age to have your baby baptized. Ashlyn and
Ali had chosen to wait until December so they could have everybody together for the christening and Christmas holiday. Drew was seven months old and much too big to fit into the christening gown and the keeper was really upset about it but there was nothing to be done. They had made a decision that was right for them and the whole family and it meant Drew couldn’t wear Gram’s christening gown. That Sunday morning as everyone got ready for the church service, Beth and Chris knocked on the open door of the nursery where Ashlyn and Ali were just finishing dressing their baby boy for his big day. The brunette had found a christening gown that was similar in style to the one Gram had made by hand and, although it was nowhere near as good, it would have to do.

“Hey, we don’t mean to interrupt but we wanted to give you guys something, a couple of things actually” Chris said softly, not wanting to startle his godson or anyone else in the room.

Ali sat down in the glider and started to nurse Drew as Beth sat on the twin bed to get off of her feet.

“Sorry guys, but we’re on a tight schedule this morning” the brunette apologized.

“Don’t sweat it” Chris smiled at her. “Nothing phases me anymore.”

“So what’s up Bubba?” Ashlyn asked after cleaning up the changing table and turning to face her brother.

“Well, we know Gram’s gown doesn’t fit him” he looked down solemnly, knowing how upset his sister had been about it. “But we thought you might want to wrap him in one of these blankets that she made for Johnny.” He reached his hand out and offered two baby blankets, one was all blue and the other was mostly white with a blue pattern around the edge. “We know it’s not the same but...”

Before he could get another word out, Ashlyn almost knocked him over with a powerful hug. She held him tightly and he closed his eyes and smiled as he hugged her back.

“Aw Bash, I’m sorry she’s not here to see your boy” he choked out, feeling how emotional the blonde was. “But he’ll always have her with him. You gave her to him right in his name and that’s the coolest thing.”

They were all quiet for a couple of minutes as Chris’ words hung in the air, comforting and calming the frayed nerves and battered hearts.

“She made us, geez I don’t know, six or seven blankets for him” Beth added after another minute. She looked at Ali and let the two siblings stay in their moment together. “Most of them are still in pretty good shape. We’ve only had to retire two of them and you do not want the gory details on either one, trust me” she chuckled and Ali laughed with her. “But we thought it was only right that you guys should have a couple, whether you decide to use one today or not. So, sorry it’s taken us seven months to get them to you.”

“Thank you so much you guys” Ali said with a warm smile. “That really means a lot.”

“These are awesome” Ashlyn finally said as she pulled back from the hug and looked at the two beautiful, soft blankets in her hands. She turned to show them to her wife. “Can we use one today?” her voice was hopeful and almost child-like as she looked at the brunette.

“Oh course.” Ali replied with a bright smile. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard a better idea.”

And as Ashlyn stood there proudly watching her son, in her brother’s strong arms, as he giggled his way through the baptism, she couldn’t help thinking what a good Harris he was going to become.
His name would always be Krieger but his Holatka and Harris ancestors would surround and protect him all his life, just as the beautiful hand-made blanket wrapped around him did that day.

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The week was everything Ashlyn could have hoped for. She had been trying not to let her expectations get too high, but she was so excited to share her New England Christmas experience with her family that it was hard to temper them. Just as she had thrilled at the chance to share her 4th of July in Gloucester memories with them two summers ago, the blonde found herself feeling like an excited little kid as the holiday approached. Ashlyn had tried to get a feel for what everybody would want to do during their week with her but it had turned out to be a frustrating exercise. Everyone was in a very different place and mood that December and the keeper was afraid of forcing things on her family when they really didn’t want to participate. Chris and Beth were just trying to conserve their energy and keep up with 2-1/2 year old Johnny. They might have wanted to go ice skating on Boston Common but there was no way it was going to happen, at least not for Beth. Tammye and Carol were up for anything. They were in love with each other and life and possibilities. Mike Harris wanted to experience everything his daughter wanted to share. He had really enjoyed the time he spent with her that summer at the 4th of July fireworks and all around Gloucester and the North Shore. He found her enthusiasm more than a little bit contagious, even if he didn’t freely admit it.

Ali suggested that they plan one thing each day and people could join them if they wanted to. If not, they could do their own thing or just hang out at the house until the daily event participants returned. They would have the rest of the day to spend together doing whatever they wanted around the house.

“Pick the four things that you really want to show them and share with them. Then plan one for each day and go from there.” Ali was feeding Drew his baby cereal as they had dinnertime together in early December. “We’re going to my dad’s for Christmas Eve so keep that in mind when you’re planning Tuesday.”

“Yeah, I was thinking Monday, Thursday, Friday and then Saturday for the outings” Ashlyn replied as she ate the beef stew she had made for dinner. She had decided to try her hand at some new recipes while she was being all domestic during the offseason. It had not gone well so far. “God, this is terrible” she looked down at the stew in front of her as if the bottom half of her bowl had just now started to taste bad. “Why haven’t you said anything?”

“Well, I’ve only had a couple of bites” Ali demurred. “I didn’t think it was bad...”

“Don’t start lying to me now honey” the keeper smiled. “It doesn’t suit you.”

“Well, I think it’s a little bland. But if you’re going to mess it up, that’s definitely the way you want to go” she chuckled. “You can fix bland sometimes. But if it’s just horrible you’re screwed.”

“So if this is horrible I get screwed?” she questioned, perking up at her beautiful brunette’s words. “I think we’re in business then” she winked at Ali.

“Just settle down there All Star” the brunette laughed, which made Drew laugh. “That’s right, huh big boy? Your mama’s twisting my words around on me, isn’t she?”

Drew squealed and instead of taking the spoon into his mouth he flailed both his arms up and knocked the spoon out of Ali’s hand. The baby cereal, which was about the consistency of thin oatmeal, ended up right in the brunette’s face. She got her eye shut just in the nick of time and...
avoided having to change her contacts. Ashlyn started to howl with laughter but remembered that she shouldn’t encourage him to repeat that behavior. She bolted from the table and barely made it into the family room before she burst out laughing. Ali got over her surprise and stifled her own chuckle as their adorable boy squealed again and then blew out a big raspberry with his sloppy lips.

“I think he’s voting with me on the ‘screwed’ issue” the blonde said seriously when she returned a couple of minutes later. “I think it was pretty clear.”

“Ha ha, very funny” Ali made a face at her keeper as she continued feeding him with a stronger hold on the new spoon. “Just get back to planning your Christmas week out.” She smiled slyly and winked at Ashlyn. “For the record, I have nothing against you getting screwed.”

Monday started with a tour of the Knight-Harris offices that none of them had seen yet. They piled into Ali’s truck and the huge Subaru SUV that Ashlyn had arranged to borrow for the week and drove into Cambridge after breakfast. Everybody wanted to see the new office and Ali and Ashlyn were both really excited to share it with them. They had worked hard for it and were proud of it. In addition to the Harris contingent, Deb and Mike Christopher, Sandi Leroux, Ken and Vicki, and Kyle and Nathan all drove in from Ipswich to join them for the outing. Ali and Drew stopped by Sydney’s house to pick the Dwyers up, and they all met in the lobby of the nearly empty office building. K-H was officially closed for the week, but technically, they were never really closed. If one of their clients needed something then one of the agents would have to take care of it. In general, it was a quiet week for their business.

It was a kid-friendly kind of a day and everybody was relaxed about Cash and Johnny running around like the crazy 2-1/2 year olds they were. Somebody stuck with them to make sure they didn’t break anything or hurt themselves, and everyone enjoyed their playfulness and energy. Ali watched the boys and felt excited about Drew being able to join them one day. The baby boy watched the bigger boys intently from his place on Ali’s hip, grinning and showing his two bottom teeth. He was just starting to think about crawling but wasn’t quite ready yet. He would sit on his butt and kind of bob up and down, or get on his hands and knees and rock forward and back. But he hadn’t figured out the next step. Maybe this week he would get his own Christmas miracle and start crawling.

After spending about an hour at K-H and availing themselves of the bathrooms, the group bundled up and walked the few blocks to the subway station near the Longfellow Bridge. This was also called the ‘Salt and Pepper’ bridge because there were brick turrets or structures that looked like giant salt and pepper shakers that spread out all along the length of the bridge. It was only two quick stops before they were at Boston Common and headed to ice skate at the outdoor Frog Pond, just as Ali and Ashlyn had done their first Christmas together. It was a beautiful, clear day but it was cold. It wasn’t dangerously frigid, but it was a typical December day in Boston - below freezing but not painful if you were dressed right.

Ashlyn expected some of the group to skate and some of them to balk at it. But they could wander around the Common if they chose not to join the fun. Molly and Niki and Noah joined them soon after they arrived and their large group was complete. It was 10:30am and not too packed, thankfully. It really started to get busy in the afternoons which is why the blonde had insisted on getting an early start that day. They could rest, relax and warm up while they ate lunch after they skated and watch everybody else try to cram onto the ice in the afternoon. Boston was a real hockey town so they started skating young. New Englanders started all of their winter sports young. Dom rented some skates and a helmet for Cash and got him ready to go as Sydney got her skates laced up. Beth and Molly would sit this one out, their unborn babies’ best interests foremost on their minds. And they were more than happy to take Drew off of Ali’s hands so she could skate too.
“What do you think Bubba?” Ashlyn asked her brother with more than a hint of challenge in her voice.

“I think you’re all nuts” he laughed and shook his head.

Johnny watched Cash awkwardly walk towards the ice holding his mother’s hand. Sydney helped him get his balance and then they slowly started skating together as Dom got his skates on.

“I want” the toddler pointed at the ice as Beth and Chris looked at each other.

Tammye, Carol, Deb and Sandi all sat down nearby and started putting skates on while Kyle, Nathan and Ali stepped onto the ice and took off for a couple of quick laps around the pond. Niki came over and started to get Noah ready to go as Johnny watched the 4-year old strap his helmet to his head.

“Johnny too?”

“Let’s go Bub” Mike Harris said as he sat down next to his son and grandson, depositing skates and helmets at their feet. “If I can do it, you can do it.”

“Yesss!” Ashlyn pumped her fist and high-fived the older ladies as they walked past her to get onto the ice. “This is awesome!”

Within another ten minutes everybody was on the ice and skating. The number of good skaters was greater than the number of first-time skaters so there were lots of extra hands to help the newbies. Only Ashlyn and Mike Christopher were somewhere in the middle, not good but not first-timers. They both still needed some assistance, particularly with starting and stopping, but they did alright on their own as long as nobody bumped into them. Chris was still dragging his feet, now clad in huge, black skates. He was using his fear of Johnny getting hurt as his excuse as he watched his own father fall flat on his face. Kyle scooped the elder Harris up and gave him some tips, even holding his forearms and skating backwards with him for a while to help him get the feel for the ice without being afraid of falling again.

“Listen you big chicken” Ashlyn said quietly as she stood in front of him and leaned close so nobody else would hear. “You’re embarrassing the Harris name. Now get your ass out here. Your old man and your mom are both doing it!”

As that interaction went on, Ali quietly skated over and took Johnny by his arms and led him out onto the ice, never letting him go. She held him under his arms from behind and bent over, skating behind him and doing all the work as he glided across the ice between her legs. He laughed his beautiful, joyous, toddler laugh and Beth joined in.

“Don’t look now, but your son is skating too” she needled her nervous husband.

“What?!?” Chris whipped his head around and nearly fell over.

“She’s an excellent skater and she won’t let anything happen to him, I promise” Ashlyn assured him. “Now come on. Unless you’re pregnant, I don’t want to hear another excuse. Let’s go.”

And that was that. Ali skated to Kyle and asked him to go help Chris. Ken stepped in to help Mike Harris and Kyle grabbed Nathan and the two of them gave Chris his first skating lesson as Ashlyn watched and listened and got a refresher course. They spent two hours skating and laughing and falling and swearing a little bit too. There were no major incidents, just a couple minor ones. Carol fell backwards as she tried to save Tammye from falling and landed on her tailbone and all the experienced skaters knew how much that hurt. She said she was ok and got back on her feet, not
wanting to give up. Deb, Vicki and Sandi finally convinced Carol and Tammye to let go of each other and hold onto one of them instead and things had gone a lot smoother after that. Vicki had fallen when some idiot came crashing through the mass of people, trying to go too fast and show off for somebody. Ken shouted after him and told him to slow down and then focused the white-hot Krieger glare on him until he lost sight of him. Mike Christopher fell forward as Mike Harris had done earlier, sliding for several feet on his stomach because he had been going a bit faster. Forward was always better because you didn’t bruise your tailbone and you usually were lower to the ground so the fall wasn’t as bad. You just wanted to keep your face off of the ice if at all possible. Sydney and Dom skated together, each holding one of Cash’s hands between them. Noah was a whiz and needed no assistance whatsoever, even though Niki stuck right by his side the whole time, even dragging Ashlyn along with her for some of it. Ali never let go of Johnny and he had the best time. He smiled and laughed and kept saying ‘More! More!’ Sydney came over towards the end of their time on the ice and patted her best friend on her butt.

“Hey, let me take him and you go skate with your girl. I promise I’ll protect him like my own” she smiled and gave the brunette a little hipcheck.

“Love you Syd” Ali kissed her on the cheek after they switched positions and then sped around the pond to catch up to Ashlyn.

“How good lookin’” she smacked her wife on her butt and came to a stop in front of her, grabbing her arms as the blonde started to lose her balance after the smack. They grinned at each other and it felt just as magical as it had the first time they had done this together. “Care to go for a spin?” Ali quirked her eyebrow and stuck her hand out for her wife to hold.

“I’m having the best time” Ashlyn confessed as they held hands and slowly skated around the pond. She tried to look at her beautiful brunette and started to lose her balance again, but she caught herself.

“Look at you!” Ali enthused. “We have to do this more so you can get better. You’ll have so much fun babe. I promise.”

They made another couple of laps and knew it was time to get going. It was too cold to be outside for much longer, even though they were keeping warm with the physical exertion.

“Can we stop for a minute. Over here” Ashlyn pointed to a spot.

They stood together, arm in arm, with rosy cheeks and big smiles and looked out over the ice at their family and friends moving around the pond. Mike Harris was now skating on his own, showing remarkable balance and coordination. Chris was terrible and it was mostly his own fault because he just wouldn’t trust himself or Kyle or Nathan. He looked miserable and Ashlyn was pretty sure it was a combination of embarrassment, fear and the cold. He was skating close to his dad but the older Harris was ready to go a little faster and left Chris behind. Deb had gone to skate with her husband, holding his hand and matching his slow pace just as Ali had done with her wife. Tammye, Carol, Vicki, Sandi and Ken were all skating together in a tight group and laughing more than almost anyone on the ice. Ali couldn’t remember when she had seen her father laugh so much. Sydney and Dom skated together, each with a toddler between their legs and Beth got up to take some pictures as they came around again. And Kyle and Nathan were still trying to help Chris. At least they seemed to be having fun while they were doing it. The big man was the first one off the ice though. They helped him to the nearest bench and then went back out for a few more laps together, holding hands like the madly-in-love queens that they were.

“I really want to bring Drew out and skate together, all three of us” Ali said wistfully.
“That would be awesome” the keeper agreed with a grin. “I’ll get better. That way I can actually help with that instead of you trying to skate with two babies.”

They warmed up an hour later in the private dining room at the ‘Union Oyster House’ near Faneuil Hall and Quincy Market. It was the most touristy area in Boston but it was pretty close to the Common and Ashlyn had booked the room for 1pm knowing they were going to have a huge group and not want to go too far after skating. The keeper loved to bring people to the restaurant and tell them how it was the oldest restaurant in America. It opened in 1826. How cool was that? Ashlyn loved the idea that her grandparents could have eaten there for some special occasion. Or maybe Captain Leighton and his family dined there every week. Who knew? But the possibilities were endless. It was also the oldest continuously operating eatery in the country and it had only had three different owners in its’ long and storied history. And, on top of all that, it was unbelievably delicious food and quintessentially New England. The keeper had never been there at Christmastime so it was kind of new to her too that afternoon.

Ali offered to stay in the city as a tour guide for anybody that wanted to do some more exploring after lunch. Tammye and Carol almost took her up on it, but the Southerners were both cold and Carol’s ass was killing her from her spill on the ice. The kids were either already asleep or getting fussy and cranky because of missed naps so they all headed home. Kyle and Nathan were staying at their parents’ houses in Ipswich and Deb and Mike Christopher were staying with Sandi Leroux in Ipswich too. Deb didn’t take her friend up on her open offer of hospitality too often but this was definitely the trip to do so. The big old house was packed.

The keeper wasn’t going to get to celebrate Epiphany with her family because they were going home the following weekend, before New Year’s. But she took her idea of drawing names for Christmas so everybody just had one gift to buy and she implemented it this year. Anybody could also get a gift for the kids, of course. But all the adults were giving and receiving one gift each. She had done a big Facetime call the day after Thanksgiving when Kyle and Nathan were still around. They all gathered at Ken’s house and all of the Harrises gathered at Chris’ house and they watched as Ashlyn drew the names. There was a $50.00 spending limit on the gift, and a $25.00 minimum.

Ashlyn drew Nathan’s name and had to buy him a Christmas gift. She picked for Ali next and the brunette had to buy Tanner a gift. She picked for Ken and he had to buy Beth a gift...

Ashlyn - Nathan
Ali – Tanner
Ken – Beth
Vicki – Mike C.
Koty – Kyle
Tanner – Vicki
Chris – Koty
Beth – Tammye
Deb – Ashlyn
Mike C. – Chris
Kyle – Carol
Nathan – Ali
Mike H. – Deb
Carol – Mike H.
Tammye - Ken

The rest of the time from after lunch Monday to Christmas Eve at Ken & Vicki’s was spent relaxing, playing with Johnny, feeding Drew, playing board games and card games and video games, watching soccer and Christmas movies, playing with or walking the dogs, eating delicious
food, buying presents and wrapping presents. Deb, Ali and Carol cooked up a storm together. The Southerner had all sorts of tricks up her sleeve for the holidays and it was a nice and refreshing addition to the more traditional Krieger offerings. The whole group knew they were going to eat well that week as long as one of those three women was still alive and kicking. Tammye made her sugar cookies that Ashlyn always raved about and Ali had to admit they were the best she’d ever had.

Ali had taken a bunch of wrapping paper and bows, ribbons and other gift wrapping supplies out to the garage and put them up next to the table in the loft. When Knight-Harris moved out they took the office furniture with them. The mini fridge that had been out there was now in Ali’s Cambridge office so she could keep her breastmilk refrigerated without bothering anybody else. The random furniture that had been leftover from Ali’s house, like her dining room table and chairs, was all that was left up in the loft. This way there was an area people could go to wrap without having to worry about being interrupted or discovered. Almost everybody took advantage of the area during those twenty or so waking hours before they went to Ken’s house for Christmas Eve. It was pretty entertaining watching everyone scramble around trying to get a gift that their person would like or appreciate. Some of the names drawn were easy for the selector, like Tanner picking his mom’s name or Beth getting Tammye. They spent a lot of time together and knew each other well. But other pairings were far more difficult. Chris picked Koty and Kyle picked Carol and neither man had any clue what to get for their gift. Christmas morning would certainly be fun.

Everyone was loaded into Ali’s truck and the SUV Tuesday afternoon, ready to make the drive up to Ipswich. Drew and Johnny and all of the crap that had to be carried along with them were packed as well as the food they were bringing. The natives were getting restless and Ashlyn climbed the backstairs, three at a time, to see what was taking her wife so long.

“Al, what are you doing?” she asked as she walked into the bedroom, trying to hide the impatience in her voice. “You were dressed a half hour ago. How do you have fewer clothes on now?”

“I’m sorry” the brunette answered quickly, pulling her head out of her closet to look at her wife standing there with her hands on her hips and looking beautiful. “I just need another minute” she ducked back in, hastily moving blouses on hangers back and forth and sighing loudly.

Ashlyn was wearing a new Christmas sweater with a pair of charcoal dress pants and stylish black boots. The sweater was bright red with white snowflakes in a band across her chest. It was a crewneck and she wore it over a white collared shirt with her hair down and slightly curly. It had been easy for her to get dressed because she had decided a month ago that she and Drew were going to wear matching sweaters and she didn’t care if anyone thought it was corny.

“But what happened baby?” she asked as she looked at the five or six blouses that had been discarded on the bed, including the one that Ali had been wearing earlier. “You looked beautiful in your outfit before.”

Ali whipped a black blouse off of a hanger and stuck her arms into it before taking her black skirt off and stepping into a red one instead.

“You’d better pray I can zip this up” she grumbled as she moved towards her wife, working on the buttons of her blouse as she walked. “Because if I can’t I’m staying home.”

“Ali, honey” Ashlyn stepped towards her and quickly helped her with her buttons, kissing her cheek sweetly, “you don’t have to get dressed up. You always look good, no matter what you wear.” She continued doing up buttons as Ali took a steadying breath and started to pull the zipper up on her skirt. Getting her pre-baby wardrobe to fit her post-baby body had been an ongoing challenge for the brunette, even though her stomach was almost back to normal. Things just
weren’t always in the same place anymore. The keeper knew this and was always careful when the subject came up. “You’re gorgeous.”

“Thank fucking God” Ali breathed out as the zipper made it all the way up. “The universe owed me that one” she chuckled as they went down the backstairs.

“What happened to your Christmas blouse though?” Ashlyn asked again, confused about why the last-minute change had been necessary.

Ali rolled her eyes at the bottom of the stairs and blushed a little bit as she took her wife’s hand, never slowing down as they made their way to the mudroom to grab her coat and purse.

“I was all set to go and I bent over to put my boots on and I popped two buttons.”

Ashlyn stifled a laugh, thankful she was standing behind the brunette, helping her into her coat. If Ali could have seen her face she would have been in trouble.

“That sucks honey” the blonde kissed her cheek again as they went out the door.

“Nice try slick, but I heard you laugh” Ali challenged without turning around to look at her keeper. She kept walking towards her truck with a smirk on her face. “You have until we get back home to make it up to me or you won’t be getting your present tonight.”

The holiday spirit was alive and well as they all celebrated Christmas Eve at Ken’s house. Sydney and her family were there as well as the rest of the family that was staying in Ipswich. The Scott Kriegers were staying up in New Hampshire that evening, but would be coming down to the big old house for Christmas dinner tomorrow afternoon. They grazed on delicious platters of appetizers and chased Cash and Johnny around as they got into everything in the un-kidproofed house. In Ken and Vicki’s defense, Drew wasn’t even crawling yet so they didn’t have to worry about him getting into anything. And the two toddlers seemed to feed off of each other. Every time Cash found something new to explore, Johnny was right there with him, and vice versa. Everybody thought Ashlyn and Drew looked adorable in their matching sweaters, and they did. The blonde grinned like an idiot as she moved around the first floor carrying her boy in her arms. She finally gave him up to an eager Grandma so Deb could have some time with him before he fell asleep. Deb and Mike Christopher sat together on the couch and played with the baby for as long as they could. Tanner and Kyle competed against Nathan and Dom, playing a modified indoor version of cornhole in the hallway.

“Thanks for having everybody over tonight you guys” Ali said to her father and step-mother as the three stood in the kitchen watching all their loved ones move through the house in varying stages of merriment.

Almost everyone was having a very nice time. It was relaxed and easy to be there and you could feel the love and friendship filling the space. Everyone but Koty, that is. Vicki’s oldest son was home from college for his winter break and none too happy about it. He had been surly and distant since the time they all arrived and it didn’t seem like anything was going to change it. He refused to engage, regardless of who invited him to do what. He camped out in the dimly lit den watching a Netflix show on his laptop and concentrating on his phone. His girlfriend had gone home for Christmas, to Vermont, and Koty was miserable and not trying to hide it.

“Oh, we’re happy to do it” Vicki gave her a warm smile. “We’ve got a good group, don’t we?”

“We sure do” Ali replied as she watched Sydney pry her son’s hands off of the drawstring for the drapes in the living room.
Ken squeezed his daughter in a side hug and kissed the side of her head.

“Merry Christmas princess.”
Chapter Notes

One of the characters has a PTSD reaction to a physical altercation towards the end of this chapter. It's nothing too serious, but just in case someone needs this warning, here you go.
There is some offensive language used too, and drugs and alcohol play a part in all of it.

Christmas morning found everyone in the big old house a little tired and a lot excited. Ashlyn had dedicated her evening before to waiting on her wife, hand and foot. Once she had given Drew to Deb she could focus on making sure Ali didn’t have to get up for anything the rest of the evening. The keeper would find a way to climb out of the doghouse if it killed her. They hadn’t officially talked about it, but both women had come to absolutely love their sexy Christmas Eves together. There was no way Ashlyn was going to be the reason this year was ruined. She didn’t make a big deal of it, but she took care of her wife so well that people started to notice.

“Ok, she’s either trying to dig her way out of trouble or you promised her some naughty Christmas Eve nookie tonight if she behaved” Sydney finally said when she and her best friend had a moment alone in the kitchen. “Which is it?” she asked with a giggle.

“Both” Ali smirked.

By the time they got home and got everybody situated and taken care of and Drew put to bed, it was later than they would have liked. They were both tired but they weren’t going to skip their private tradition unless one of them was completely passed out exhausted. Their sexy time that night wasn’t as long and drawn out as it had been in the past, but they had a house full of people and they were afraid of being interrupted. They quickly exchanged their special gifts and got down to business. Ali had given her keeper a tiny vibrator that you wore on your finger, like a ring. It had a couple of different settings and they enjoyed experimenting with it that night. Ashlyn had given her beautiful brunette a new set of restraints to replace their original red satin ones that had finally broken down on them. Even though the prolonged teasing, bordering on torture, wasn’t either of their favorite thing, they did both enjoy tying the other up. There was something undeniably hot about seeing your wife tied up and desperate for you to touch her. It never failed to excite them and they just chose not to drag out the teasing for too long when they used them. They did not try the new, black, satin restraints that night because they felt pushed for time and wanted to make sure they each had at least one really good orgasm to celebrate another Christmas Eve together. Aside from the ring vibrator, which they both really liked, it had been pretty straightforward sex. And that was more than ok with both of them. As much as they both enjoyed trying different things and changing things up in bed, there was nothing wrong with their regular sex. For them it was all about the intense connection they felt, and it always had been. And as long as that connection was there between them it didn’t matter what position they were in or what lingerie they wore or what toys they used or what filthy things they said. Ashlyn and Ali had great sex. Sometimes they had incredible or phenomenal sex. If they were tired or rushed and things were a little off, it was still good sex. They were truly blessed and they knew it.

Ali went to get Drew up and nurse him while Ashlyn went down and got the coffee started.
Christmas morning. The only person who was in any kind of a rush to open gifts that morning was Johnny, but he would forget about it if someone didn’t remind him. He was only 2-1/2 years old. It was a nice, relaxed morning as they ate breakfast and drank coffee together. And by this morning, their fourth together in the big old house, they had all gotten good at showering and getting dressed and ready in an expedited and organized manner. No small feat with seven adults, one toddler and a baby. Ali was excited because she had actually found a nice, comfy Christmas sweater to wear that even fit over her big boobs. Of course it was pink and pretty and kind of princess-y and she loved it. It was going to be a casual but hopefully nice Christmas day in their home and they wanted everyone to be comfortable so they could just enjoy themselves and their loved ones and the magic of the day.

When the masses started arriving mid-morning is when the fun really began. The Scott Kriegers were coming after lunch, as were the Dwyers and Sandi. Before they arrived the Kriegers and Harrises did their gift exchange and watched Johnny open the rest of his presents. Ashlyn helped Drew open his as he looked on, wide-eyed and curious. He wanted to touch everything, almost as if that was the only way he could truly register the new toy or outfit or stuffed animal. And everything that he touched, he tried to put into his mouth. Everybody pulled at least one thing out of his mouth at least once that day.

The gift exchange for everybody else was fun and interesting, for the most part. There were a couple of duds though. Koty gave Kyle a $25.00 gift card to Starbucks and you could still see Koty’s name as the original recipient on the back and the heart and ‘Happy Birthday’ that Vicki had written on it. That was the worst.

“Thanks man” Kyle said dryly. “You shouldn’t have.”

Mike Harris gave Deb a tacky tourist shell bracelet with her name on a little piece of plastic near the clasp. It would have been hysterical except he hadn’t meant it as a joke. He thought she would like it because he knew how much she loved the ocean. Deb was sweet about it and realized he had tried his best and even put some thought into it. And that was the whole point.

Mike Christopher bought a $50.00 gift card to his favorite golf store and gave it to Chris. There were locations all over Florida so it would be convenient for Chris to use it. It was almost a good gift, except that gift cards, when you were only buying one gift for one person, were a major copout. Also, Chris wasn’t a big golfer those days. He was a busy man who was just about to get even busier when Beth gave birth at the end of January.

“Ok, next time there’s a new rule” Ashlyn declared when they were halfway through and had seen four gift cards exchange hands. “No gift cards. Come on people. One gift! You had to buy one gift!” Her smile was big and her dimple was out but Ali knew she was truly disappointed in their families for taking the easy way out. “Alright, who’s next?”

Mike Harris was next and he opened a small, spiral bound book with photographs of Chris, Ashlyn, Johnny and Drew filling it. There were about twelve photos altogether and she had tucked a couple of duplicates of the babies in the back, behind the last page.

“I know everybody’s got their phone with all their pictures in it these days, but I think it’s nice to have the old-fashioned kind too” she offered with a warm smile, trying to read his face as he turned page after page and stared at the thoughtful gift in his hands. “There are a couple of wallet size in the back, in case, you know, you actually want to put them in your wallet.”

Everybody was quiet, knowing this was a big moment for the two people who seemed so far apart. Tammye held her breath and tried not to look at her ex-husband. He was clearly very moved and trying to get control of his emotions. She knew that one too many sets of eyes would make him
self-conscious and he might just get up and leave the room. The other Harrises shared the same fear and looked down or away during the tense minute that seemed to last for an hour.

“That me!” Johnny yelled as he ambled over to his Papa and leaned on his lap, pointing at a picture of himself at the beach with Chris.

And just like that the tension was broken as everybody laughed while Mike lifted the toddler onto his knee and showed him all the pictures.

“Thank you” he nodded at Carol after the first picture. He smiled and tried to say something else but then closed his mouth and just nodded again.

“Merry Christmas” Carol replied with another kind smile.

“See?” Ashlyn said, touched by the sweet moment. “That’s what I’m talking about. Way to go Carol.”

They spent the next hour finishing the gift exchange and saw a couple of Christmas movie Blu-Rays, a Boston Breakers scarf, some golf balls and tees, a set of new ear buds, a holiday tie, a Christmas hat with mistletoe dangling off of the front, and other basic things opened and embraced.

There had only been two really thoughtful and unique gifts exchanged after Carol’s. Ali gave Tanner a soccer journal with some notes she had written in it. The college freshman had just struggled through his first season playing Division 1 soccer at Providence College in Rhode Island. Ali remembered vividly what that felt like and wanted to try and help her step-brother out as much as she could. She had started as a freshman at Penn State, she was that good. Tanner rode the bench for most of the season, playing as an occasional sub, and had started questioning himself and his abilities and pretty much everything in his life as a result. The brunette hoped the journal might help him re-dedicate himself in his off-season and guide him along the way. Of course, it would only work if he used it. She knew she would need to devote some time to the young man, if he wanted her assistance.

And Ashlyn had stumbled upon an antique mortar and pestle set in one of her searches for the ship’s bell they used for Drew’s christening. The mortar and pestle was to the pharmacist what the hand-planer was to the carpenter or even shipbuilder. It was the original tool. The mortar and pestle was a bowl and a heavy tool with a rounded end that druggists used to crush pills up into powders. The set she found was a chalky black marble and she cleaned it up and gave it to Nathan for Christmas.

“Thanks Ash” he got up and crossed the room to hug her. “It’s beautiful. I love it” he grinned as they separated.

“I thought the black marble would work ok in your new place too” she winked at him as he moved back to sit next to Kyle on the floor pillows in the family room. “I know your new roommate can be fussy about his knick-knacks...” she teased and got a laugh out of the rest of the group.

They had finally decided to make the big move. Nathan was done working in Boston and had taken the month of January off to move and get settled into a new apartment with Kyle and Luna in NYC. Both men were excited and nervous but overwhelmingly optimistic about the huge step in their relationship. Kyle had taken his sister’s sage advice from July and finally gotten up enough courage to talk to Nathan about how stuck he felt and how unsure he was and ultimately how much he loved him. And, just like his sister, he had been rewarded with an equal amount of honesty and love and commitment in return. They weren’t engaged yet, but the whole room knew it was just a
matter of time. They were a great match. Nathan’s calm and steady demeanor helped anchor Kyle while still allowing him to be his free and capricious self. There was just enough rope tied to that anchor to give Kyle room without letting him float too far away. And Kyle loved feeling that tug as he reached the limit, always happy to come back to Nathan’s loving and accepting arms before floating away again. It was beautiful to see and Ali was so happy for her big brother. She had never seen him so happy and confident in his relationship and it was truly the best Christmas gift she would receive that year.

They grazed at lunchtime, enjoying more of the leftovers Ken and Vicki had sent home with them the night before, and spread out throughout the house for the afternoon. There were Christmas movies on in the family room and soccer on in the living room. Some people took a quick nap, others powered through and went for a brisk walk to the beach, while others played a little soccer in the backyard. There was some dirty old leftover snow on the ground, only about an inch, not nearly enough to play around in or stop a backyard soccer game. It was just enough to look gross and make you wish for a good shot of the fresh fluffy stuff. Ashlyn desperately wanted it to snow so they could take Johnny out to play in it before they left on Sunday. The best chance, according to the weather experts, was coming Saturday morning. Both Ashlyn and Ali kept their fingers crossed and hoped for at least a few inches.

The afternoon welcomed the Scott Kriegers and Sydney and her family to the big old house and it groaned under the pressure of twenty-six adults, 8-year old little Allie, two 2-year olds, baby Drew and four dogs. Both Ali’s cousin Rachael and her cousin Jeff’s wife, Vivian, were pregnant. Jeff and Vivian had been trying to get pregnant for a long time and had finally been successful with the help of a fertility treatment. Vivian had called Ali after she announced her pregnancy the Thanksgiving before and talked with her about how she and Ashlyn had done it and whether or not she thought one of the different methods would help she and Jeff conceive. Becky Krieger was in her glory. Not only was her daughter going to have her second grandchild, but her eldest son was going to be bringing the next generation of the Krieger name to the world. Ashlyn heard the older woman saying something to the effect that it would be the first real Krieger of that generation, implying that Drew wasn’t a real Krieger because the name hadn’t passed down through Kyle, the male heir. She opened her mouth but Ali put her arm around her and escorted her into the next room, out of earshot.

“Honey, just let it go” she leaned up and kissed the blonde’s lips softly as they hugged. “She needs to say that, for whatever reason, so just let her have it. She’s the only one who thinks that and somebody else will correct her soon enough. You don’t need to fight that battle, especially not today. Ok?”

“Man” Ashlyn shook her head slowly with her jaw clenched and her eyes ablaze. “She is not my favorite person” she finally gritted out as her face contorted in frustration.

Ali laughed lightly, patted her on the chest and then kissed her on the cheek.

“This is nothing” she rolled her eyes. “You should have heard her twenty years ago. This is evolved Aunt Becky. Just be appreciative and move on. Trust me.”

Christmas Dinner was served buffet style at 3pm with everybody sitting at one of the many dining tables on the first floor, and some using coffee tables at couches to dine. Those brave souls had to fend off the dogs, who were generally well-behaved. But put a plate of turkey down at their eye-level and beware. Ashlyn finally put them all outside while they finished dinner. Carol, Deb and Ali had done the lion’s share of the cooking. Nathan and Ashlyn had helped whenever they could. And Dom jumped in too as soon as he arrived. The food was wonderful and, with Carol’s new Southern influence, fresh and different. They had all the usual dishes so if anybody wanted to eat
the same Christmas meal, with minor variations, that they did every year they could still do that. But most folks enjoyed the new dishes and flavors that Carol introduced them to.

Becky Krieger, always the one to bring up the subject matter that made at least half the room uncomfortable and usually one or two people genuinely pissed off, asked Ali how long she was planning to keep breastfeeding. Before letting her niece answer, she prattled on about the little she remembered about breastfeeding from thirty years ago. Rachael hadn’t been able to breastfeed so Aunt Becky didn’t have a modern example to look to for more current information. Ali saw her mother’s back stiffen, ready to defend her daughter in another battle with one of the most close-minded women she had ever known.

“Mom” Rachael said curtly, flashing her mother a pleading look.

“It’s ok Rach” Ali smiled. “So much has changed about the way they used to do things back when we were born. It’s amazing to think about what you ladies had to go through. Everything’s changed from the timing of things to the drugs you take or don’t take to the positions they want you to use so you’re more comfortable during labor. They’ve made a lot of new discoveries about breastfeeding too.”

“Yeah, they recommend a full year if you can do it” Vivian added, clearly having started her research in anticipation of her own bundle of joy. “And some women continue for up to two years. It’s supposed to be so good for the baby.”

“Two years!” Becky laughed dismissively. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Viv’s right” Deb said evenly. “Not all babies are interested in it once they start transitioning to solids, but the longer you can do it the better it’s supposed to be for the baby.”

Becky looked at Deb and you could see her starting to choose her words carefully.

“Well, I’m hoping for a year” Ali answered quickly, trying to ward off the impending battle. “So far so good, but it’s really up to him” she smiled again. “It’s a pretty special thing, but I’ll be honest” she leaned forward conspiratorially, “part of me will be happy when he’s done. It’s not always fun and it’s a lot of work. But he’s worth it.”

Becky opened her mouth but Ken interrupted in a warm and kind but still firm voice.

“Ok, I think maybe some dinner conversation that doesn’t involve my daughter’s breasts might be in order now. Thank you very much” he smiled and winked at Ali.

Dinner gradually ended and, after some genuine hugs and kisses and well-wishes, the Scott Kriegers left to make the drive back up to New Hampshire. Vivian, Rachael and Ali made plans to meet for lunch later in January, all looking forward to sharing motherhood stories and tricks of the trade with each other. It was just after 5pm and everyone was full and happy. Tammye and Ashlyn took the dogs for a walk. Ali, Deb and Carol were in the kitchen putting leftovers away, cleaning up the countertops and getting ready for coffee. Ken and Vicki were at the sink doing the dishes. Beth, Chris, Sandi, the Dwyers and both Mikes were in the living room with Cash, Johnny and Drew. And Kyle and Nathan were carrying full bags of garbage and recycling out to the far side of the garage. As he closed the lid on the big trash can Kyle heard laughter and a loud noise, like a slam or somebody dropping something heavy, followed by more urgent voices and then more weird sounding laughter coming from inside the garage. He looked at Nathan and then the two men walked around and entered the garage through the side door by the backyard. The noise was coming from the loft and Kyle quickly climbed the stairs as he heard Tanner’s pleading voice.
“Come on man, that’s enough. Let’s just go grab some whiskey instead. We can crash up in her studio and just chill.”

Kyle knew as soon as he saw the look in Koty’s vacant eyes that he was high on something. Really really high.

“What’s going on guys?” he asked cautiously, trying to control his temper.

His eyes scanned the room to make sure they were alone and that there wasn’t anything else in there that he needed to worry about. The room was empty except for the gift-wrapping set up Ali had arranged on her old dining room table. Koty sat in one of the dining room chairs with his feet pushing against the edge of the table top. He had the chair tilted back precariously and was laughing as he almost fell backwards and saved himself over and over.

“Nothing” Koty replied with a dark smile. “What’s up with you, faggot?”

“Koty, come on...” Tanner took a step closer to the table and glanced quickly and apologetically at Kyle.

Nathan climbed the last few stairs and now stood next to his boyfriend, pissed off as hell.

“Oh look, it’s the other faggot too” Koty cackled, pleased with himself, and slapped his thigh as he laughed.

“Let’s go” Kyle said sternly, his face was a stone as he pointed towards the stairs.

“Make me” Koty taunted, like an eight-year old who was used to getting his way.

It wasn’t easy and it took both Tanner and Nathan to help so the drug-addled twenty-year old didn’t fall down the stairs and break his neck, but Kyle did indeed make him. When they got to the bottom of the steps and Nathan and Tanner let Kyle take over again, Koty slammed him backwards against the support post at the bottom of the stairs and then turned and punched him in the face. He winced and looked surprised when he felt the pain in his right hand.

“Koty, cut it out!” Tanner yelled.

“Kyle, don’t...” Nathan warned as he stepped between the two men to keep his boyfriend from returning the punch. “He’s not worth it. And he’s not himself.”

“That’s it, hide behind your faggot boyfriend you fucking pussy” Koty sneered.

“What’s he on?” Nathan asked Tanner, over his shoulder as he continued to stand in harm’s way.

“Ummm...I don’t...” Tanner faltered and looked away.

“Tell us Tan” Kyle said softly and met his young step-brother’s eyes. “You’re not helping him, I know you think you are, but you’re not. It’ll be ok.”

Kyle’s left cheekbone was red but he was surprisingly calm considering how vile Koty was being. He looked at Tanner and nodded his head slowly to make sure he knew he was being honest with him.

“Bath salts...I don’t really know...”

“Oh you little shit, shut your fucking mouth” Koty snapped at his younger brother and gave him a fierce look.
“Ok well I warned you Koty” Kyle spoke up, his voice strong and clear as he stepped out from behind Nathan. He looked at his boyfriend and squeezed his arm before continuing. “I told you the next time I caught you wasted I was going to beat the shit out of you.”

“Fuck you!” Koty yelled and spit in Kyle’s face and tried to make a run for the side door. Kyle grabbed the back of his shirt and pushed him down onto his stomach on the concrete floor. He leaned down and wiped his face on the shirt still balled up in his fists and then knelt down hard on Koty’s back, making him groan as the air was pushed out of his lungs. The truth was, Koty had been having a rough year. It was his second year of college and he hadn’t done well academically or on the soccer field. He didn’t make the soccer team his freshman year or his sophomore year. He played on the BC Men’s Rec team instead his freshman year, but he hadn’t even done that this year. He had casually fooled around with drugs and alcohol his freshman year, like almost every other kid who goes to college. But this year he had taken it a step further. He called Kyle’s cellphone in July after getting picked up by campus police. His girlfriend’s roommate called security because Koty was drunk and disorderly. He wasn’t even supposed to be on campus. His girlfriend was volunteering as a mentor to some freshman who had fallen behind and was trying to get caught up again. That’s why she and her roommate were still in a dorm room in July. Kyle was up visiting Ali and Drew and had called his step-brother the day before to try and meet him in the city while he was staying at Nathan’s to catch up. Koty hadn’t even returned his call. But he needed somebody that night in July to come convince security he wasn’t really a bad kid. Kyle picked him up, paid the campus fine for being a public nuisance and took him to Nathan’s where he laid into him big time. He gave him the whole tough love, don’t make the same stupid mistakes I made speech that had never failed him before. They talked again the next morning after Kyle took him out to breakfast and that’s when Kyle had made his promise. That was his one freebie. But the next time Kyle was going to beat some sense into him.

Then in September Koty had called Ashlyn to come and pick him up from campus security for getting thrown out of a bar right off of campus. The bartender knew he was a BC student and gave security a heads up. They confiscated his fake ID and took him back to campus security to cool off. Koty told the blonde it was his first time and implored her to help him just this once. She took pity on the kid, thinking it was really his first time drinking too much and getting shitfaced and thrown out of a bar. They sat in her car and talked and she warned him about her brother’s story and told him he needed to be careful and smart. She also told him she wouldn’t do this for him again. Ever. And the next time it happened she would take him right to Ken and Vicki. The final time he reached out was at the end of October. That time he called Ali and she did basically the same thing that Ashlyn had done. Only she called him on his bullshit when he tried to tell her it was his first time. She blew his mind by telling him that she knew about the September incident and that, just like Ashlyn had said, the next time this happened she was taking him to Ken and Vicki and God help him then. She tried to scare him too by warning him about Ken and how he had already gone through this once with Kyle and he would whip his ass into shape so fast Koty wouldn’t know what hit him. Clearly, none of the kind warnings, however strongly worded they had been, had worked. Koty had graduated from beer and alcohol to fucking bath salts.

Koty wasn’t a small guy, but he was nowhere near as fit or built as Kyle. He was lazy and feeling sorry for himself and wasted on top of it. It would be no match. After Koty called him a few more uncouth names and Nathan and Tanner begged him not to follow through with his promise, Kyle finally pulled him up to his feet and pushed him out the side door of the garage and down the driveway towards the mudroom. Ken and Vicki were both standing at the kitchen sink and the two windows right in front of them looked out at the driveway.

“What the hell?” Ken muttered under his breath as he dried his hands off and walked through the kitchen to the mudroom with Vicki right behind him.
Deb was cleaning up the stove on the driveway side of the kitchen, but there was no window there so she didn’t know what was about to happen. Carol was putting leftovers into the fridge, across from the stove and right next to the entrance between the mudroom and the kitchen. Ali was getting coffee cups down from the cabinet next to the fridge and putting them on the countertop there by the coffee maker. The three women were chatting idly about Becky Krieger and silly things the woman had said during her visit. Ken and Vicki made it to the mudroom and were standing in front of the desk, just inside the entrance from the kitchen when the mudroom door burst open and Kyle pushed Koty through, still holding him with both hands by the back of his shirt. Nathan and Tanner followed them in, both looking panicked and fearful.

“Oh good, you’re both here” Kyle said seriously and stopped Koty just in front of Ken and Vicki who were looking on in utter disbelief.

“Koty, what’s going on?” Vicki asked in a shaky voice.

Everybody in the adjacent rooms heard the door burst open and was trying to decide whether or not to get involved or give Ken and Vicki some privacy. But Koty didn’t say anything. His eyes were wild and whatever paranoia and aggression the drugs had brought out in him before had only been amplified by the confrontation with Kyle in the garage. Koty surged forward, making both Ken and Vicki back up reflexively. Ken put his arm out in front of his wife and pushed her back further towards the desk. Koty twisted sideways, ripping the back of his shirt and getting his hands up into Kyle’s chest. He pushed Kyle as hard as he could towards the living room door but that only made his own body fall backwards into the kitchen. As he stumbled backwards, losing his balance and about to fall, Nathan moved into the kitchen after him and tried to grab his arms to hold him up and keep him from falling. Whether he knew what he was doing next or not would be hotly debated afterwards, but Koty got his balance and punched Nathan in the face, hard.

The three women in the kitchen had all turned around to watch, seemingly in slow motion, the spectacle that had started in the mudroom and was now spilling over into their space. Deb stayed over by the stove and Carol and Ali both slid back away from the mudroom a bit, still with the countertop behind them next to the fridge. Kyle lost it when he saw Nathan’s head snap back and blood start coming out of his nose. He crossed the mudroom in two long strides and lunged after Koty, swearing at him and threatening him as he reached for him with his powerful arms. Koty tried to scramble back, the momentary power he felt after punching Nathan quickly disappearing and replaced by abject fear at his angry step-brother’s hands. There was all sorts of yelling and loud voices as Chris and Ken stood in the mudroom trying to get the fighting to stop. Koty fell backwards and reached his arms out to his sides as he flailed for balance. His right hand hit Carol in the side of her head as he desperately searched for something to help him stay upright. His hand grabbed hold of her sweater and some of her hair as he fell and he dragged her down to the floor with him as Kyle landed on top of him, hands greedily grabbing at the front of his shirt. Poor Carol slumped to the floor with her legs bent underneath her and a look of sheer terror on her face. She was pale, except for the red mark on the right side of her face where Koty had hit her. She never made a sound and remained almost perfectly still, even though the drugged-out college student still had a fistful of her sweater as he felt Kyle’s weight on his chest again.

Before Kyle could even get his arm up to take a swing, Chris and Ken moved in behind him and pushed him off of Koty and to his feet. They pulled him back into the mudroom as Mike Harris strode into the kitchen and walked Koty back towards the sink and held him there with his strong arms and equally strong glare. As soon as Koty’s hand released her, Carol started crying and shaking but seemed frozen to the spot and unable to move. Ali had backed up around the end of the counter when Koty started to fall backward so she had been safely out of reach. Only Carol had been caught in the crossfire. And now, in the middle of all the loud, angry, male voices shouting back and forth across the kitchen and mudroom, she cried even harder. Mike Christopher finally
walked into the kitchen and saw Carol on the floor. He approached her quickly and reached down to help her up, meaning nothing but kindness and assistance. But Carol shouted out, cowered back down further towards the floor and covered her head with both arms, trying to protect herself from some unseen threat.

“Don’t touch me!”

Mike stood up straight in surprise and Deb came to his side, patting his arm and pulling him back. Ali crawled towards Carol and noticed there was urine on the floor beneath her. She looked up at her mother for help.

“Alright, everybody get out of here. Now” Deb said firmly as she pushed her husband towards the mudroom. “Make sure Nathan’s ok” she instructed him with another pat.

Ken walked Kyle out to the driveway and Nathan followed with Mike Christopher close behind. Chris walked through the kitchen, locking eyes with Ali and trying to understand what was happening. Ali just nodded at him and motioned for him to keep going. He helped his father take Koty over to the nook at the back of the family room and keep him there and quiet.

“Vicki, put up the gate and keep the kids in the living room for a few minutes, ok?” Deb asked, hoping that giving the mortified mother a task would help her cope with whatever Koty had gotten himself into for a short time. “You help her ok Tanner?”

Ali was right next to Carol but afraid to touch her and cause her more stress.

“Hey Carol” she spoke softly as she knelt next to her. “It’s Ali. I’m right here and you’re ok. Nothing’s going to hurt you or me. It’s all done now.”

She very gently placed her hand on Carol’s left shoulder and bit her lip when the traumatized woman flinched and pulled away from her. Ali didn’t give up though. She held her left hand out, palm up, but didn’t initiate any contact. Deb knelt down on the other side of Carol and said calm, soothing things to her too. It took a couple of minutes but finally Carol grabbed Ali’s hand and gripped it tightly. They stood her up and walked her towards the backstairs, slowly. She held Deb’s hand too but still wasn’t saying anything or looking anywhere but straight ahead with vacant, empty eyes.

Vicki tried to talk to Koty but he was practically passed out. The adrenaline from the scene finally caught up with him and shorted his brain out. Vicki was frustrated and angry and frightened. She thanked Mike and Chris for staying with him and apologized.

“Hey, don’t do that now. None of this is your fault” Chris said as he got up and gave her a hug.

Vicki needed to be busy so she got out the mop and bucket and cleaned the kitchen floor, still stunned by Carol’s reaction to the altercation. What a mess her son had caused. What an awful mess.

When they made it up the backstairs, Deb ran into the bathroom, grabbed a towel, folded it and put it down on the bed so they could sit Carol on it and let her try and relax. Ali sat next to her, still on her left side because Carol had not let her left hand go since she first grasped it downstairs in the kitchen. Deb took her place on Carol’s other side but didn’t try to touch her again. She would wait for her to make the first move.

“Is it ok if I rub your neck a little bit Carol?” the brunette asked softly. “I know a couple of spots that can help relieve some stress. I do it for Ash after her games sometimes.”
She waited for a reply but none came. Carol sat there looking straight ahead. Her eyes were aimed at the glider rocking chair by the dressing table but she wasn’t really focused on anything. Her breathing was still rapid and her heart was racing as her body tried to deal with all the extra adrenaline coursing through it. She was pale and clammy and drenched in sweat.

“It’s going to rub your neck now” Ali soothed, choosing to risk it, knowing it would really help her. “If you want me to stop you just let me know.”

She looked at her mother as she carefully moved her right hand up to the back of Carol’s neck and began to work her strong fingers up and down slowly and steadily. Ali felt Carol’s body relax almost immediately, at least partially. They sat like that for another few minutes, just breathing in and out together. Chris came up the backstairs to check on things. He had a bottle of water in his hand and as soon as he stepped into the room Carol tensed up and started shaking again. Ali and Deb looked at each other again and Deb stood up and walked the big man down the stairs, taking the bottle of water from him when they got to the bottom.

“It’s not sure why, but she’s reacting to men right now. First Mike, now you. So no more men come near her until we tell you it’s ok, alright? She’s ok, she just needs to calm down. Ali’s helping her right now with some stress massage” Deb explained in a quiet voice.

“Thanks for taking care of her” Chris hugged Deb.

“Thank you for helping...everybody down here” Deb chuckled. “Is everybody ok?”

“Just some bumps and bruises. Kyle’s got a shiner. Nathan’s nose will be sore for a while but it’s not broken. And Koty’s still passed out.”

“Thanks for holding down the fort.”

Deb brought the water back upstairs and was relieved to see Carol starting to relax even more. She put the bottle of water on Ashlyn’s nightstand.

“Will you open the window mom” Ali nodded at the window between the dressing table and the glider. “I could use some fresh air and I think Carol might like some too.”

Before Deb could sit back down after opening the window, she heard voices and a ruckus in the kitchen. She moved quickly down the backstairs and met a panicked Tammye and Ashlyn halfway. She gave them a quick update, they had already been briefed by Chris a few minutes earlier when they returned from their walk, and let them go by her up the stairs. Tammye took Deb’s seat next to Carol and calmly picked up her hand and held it in both of hers. She glanced quickly at Ali who was still rubbing her neck and shoulders and back and doing some deep breathing with her.

“I’m here. It’s Tam, I’m right here.”

As soon as Carol felt her hand and heard her voice something clicked. She turned her head to look at Tammye and it was the first time she had been able to focus her eyes on anything since Koty backed into the kitchen. Ali looked up at her wife and saw the agonized look on her face. She smiled up at her to try and tell her that it was ok. Ashlyn looked almost as pale as Carol had twenty minutes earlier. They stayed like that for another ten minutes, just letting Carol slowly come back to them. Deb sat in the glider and Ashlyn sat backwards in the dressing table chair, not wanting to move it and make a lot of noise.

“Could I have some water, please?” Carol asked meekly, as if the sound of her own voice was much too loud inside her own head.
She released Tammye’s hand to point at the water bottle, but she would not let Ali’s hand go. She took a few sips and smiled when Tammye took her hand again and brought it to her lips to give it a soft kiss.

“Hi sugar” she said to Tammye and smiled again.

The color was returning to her cheeks and her breathing had returned to normal. The little bit Ali knew about panic attacks was that they were usually powerful, that they could happen at any time depending on what the trigger was, and that they generally lasted about thirty minutes or so. She had learned the hard way, helping Emily through a couple of them the first year they were together. If only she had known that them being together was the trigger for those panic attacks she could have saved herself a whole lot of hurt.

“How can you tell me what happened?” Carol looked directly at Ali with her beautiful dark blue eyes full of trust and courage.

The brunette gave her a replay of the events that had unfolded in the kitchen and she was relieved when Carol’s pulse stayed mostly the same. She let go of Tammye’s hand again and rubbed the right side of her face where Koty’s hand had landed. She had a slight red mark on the side of her cheekbone and a small scratch down near her pulse point on her neck from when he tried to grab onto her. Her sweater was torn at the seam along her shoulder from when he dragged her down with him and she swallowed hard when she felt the ripped fabric with her fingers.

“We think you had a panic attack Carol” Ali added. “But you seem to be feeling better now. Are you doing ok?”

“Yes, thank you. Both of you” she looked from Ali over to Deb. “I get them sometimes, but I haven’t had one in...well, in a long time.” She sighed and looked down at her lap for a long minute. “I guess I owe you ladies the truth.”
This is the backstory to Carol...and it's not pretty. I don't go into any graphic details about her abusive situation before moving to Florida. But here's a warning for when she tells her story to the ladies at the beginning of this chapter. The second half deals with Koty and then back to Christmas fun.

Carol took another drink of water and cleared her throat. Nobody had moved, even though Ali, Ashlyn and Deb all felt like they should leave Tammye and Carol alone to have this conversation.

“You don’t owe anybody anything” Deb offered from the glider. “I’m happy to stay here with you if you’d like, but please don’t feel like you have to say another word.”

“Yeah” Ashlyn agreed quickly. “Your story is yours and you tell it when you feel like it’s time. Not one minute sooner.”

“And what about you my little Clara Barton?” Carol looked at Ali again.

“I’m just glad you’re feeling better. That was pretty scary and I didn’t even get close to it” she replied honestly and smiled back at the kind, Southern woman.

“Well, you came in and rescued me, that’s for sure. I’ll never forget it” she squeezed the brunette’s hand again and then loosened her grip for the first time in forty-five minutes. She didn’t let it go, but her hold was looser and not so life-or-death. “Right out onto the battlefield like Clara Barton herself, thank you.”

“Would you like us to leave or to stay sweetheart?” Tammye asked from her other side.

“I feel like it’s time to tell my story and you all have been so good and kind to me, well, I’d like to share it with you. If that’s alright?”

They all nodded their heads or smiled back at her in response, genuinely intrigued by what truth they could possibly learn about their newest friend and family member. Carol took a deep, steadying breath and went on to talk about how she grew up in a small city called Statesboro, Georgia and lived with her affluent parents and one older brother. She went to the University of Georgia and got her degree in Business Administration back in 1982. She was 21 years old and had just graduated from college and finished the best four years of her life when she got married. Back then, in her world, women were just starting to go to colleges and universities to get a degree for themselves. It seemed ancient and archaic, but change came slowly to some areas of the South. Previously, as was the case with Carol, well-to-do young women went to college to find a husband. Carol’s father owned a paper manufacturing company and one of his wealthiest customers and business associates had a son who was a few years older than her. It wasn’t really an arranged marriage, but it had definitely been an arranged introduction. Morris Walters was charming enough as he courted Carol through her college years. He was a lawyer and just starting out when they were married in the Fall of 1982.

“Wow” Ashlyn commented as Carol paused for another sip of water. “I can’t imagine getting
married right after college graduation. I wasn’t even half the person I am today back then.”

“Times were a little different then, that’s for sure. And part of it was my family and how we were raised and what was expected of us” she clarified and continued with her story. Some families were more archaic than others.

They moved back to Statesboro and set up house, enjoying the early days of married life. Morris got a job in a law firm in town and quickly started climbing the ladder towards making partner. The first ten years of their marriage had been normal and pleasant. They were unable to get pregnant, which was a source of great sorrow for Carol. Morris cared, but only because it made him look like less of a man in certain peoples’ eyes. It was a sign of virility if a man had a lot of children. He worked a lot and drank a lot and travelled a lot. He also made a lot of money and hired people to take care of his house and property. After about two years, Carol was bored out of her mind and took a job as a secretary in an office building downtown. She had to ask Morris permission before accepting the position and that irked her. Over the years they grew more distant and spent less and less time together. The trouble started when they moved to Savannah, Georgia ten years into their marriage. Morris’ law firm was doing so well that they opened a new office in the big city by the ocean and chose Morris to run it. Although Carol was thrilled to move to one of her favorite cities, she was sad to leave her hometown and family behind.

Something about having more power at work and getting more distance from both of their families caused a tectonic shift in their relationship. Add alcoholism to the power and the distance and it became a toxic brew. Over the years Morris had become verbally abusive to Carol when he drank, which was every night and sometimes at lunch. He called her names and blamed anything and everything on her from his horse losing at the track to the fact that they couldn’t manage to have a baby. Carol took her time understanding that he was the one to blame and not her. She was a smart, educated woman, but hearing the same bullshit day in and day out made even her doubt her own truth. It took some good friends to help her believe in herself again. She decided that she would be a better wife and then Morris would go back to being the charming young man she had fallen in love with fifteen years earlier. That’s where she developed her incredible cooking skills. She took classes and studied the art of cuisine as much as possible. She kept telling herself that if she could just make him the best dinner in the world, he couldn’t help but love her again and treat her right. And just maybe he wouldn’t drink as much that night.

“Isn’t it amazing what you’ll tell yourself instead of just accepting what’s right in front of you?” Deb asked quietly as Carol paused again. “It happens way more than any of us probably realizes.”

The abuse became physical five years later. One evening after dinner he dropped the glass of bourbon he was carrying in his drunken hand and, when Carol bent down to pick up the broken glass before he could step on it and cut his feet open, he smacked her in the face so hard he knocked her out cold. It became a nightly dance they did. She tried to keep him calm and pleased so he wouldn’t get upset and hit her. And he berated her and amused himself by causing her discomfort with his cruel words. He learned how to beat her so the marks wouldn’t show up and reveal the hell he put her through. He was smart, that was for sure. The abuse got worse the longer they were together. He made sure she knew that if she even thought about telling anybody what went on in their house he would kill her with his bare hands. One of Carol’s best friends was a lawyer and she was the only person that Carol confided in. She told her what she needed to do to be free of him. She shouldn’t have needed anything other than her own words but both women knew that wasn’t how it worked. Not with powerful men like Morris. Even if Carol had pressed charges the police would take his word over hers and she’d be in an even worse situation than she was already in. She needed to get some proof that they could hold over his head and threaten him with if he didn’t leave her alone.
The most devastating blow came seven years after they moved to Savannah, two years after he started beating her every night. One of the times she hadn’t been able to get out of having sex with him, they had actually managed to get pregnant. If she played her cards right he would usually pass out drunk before he could get hard enough to even have sex with her. Every once in a while he managed to get it up and keep it up long enough to finish the job. What luck. Carol was thrilled and told her husband right away, thinking he would be happy that they would finally be having a baby. She naively thought the news would fix everything and bring her old, charming Morris back to her. He had just grunted at the news and stormed out of the house. He didn’t come back for a week and when he did, he was so drunk he drove the car right through the garage and into the swimming pool in the backyard.

“Oh my God Carol...oh my God” Tammye whispered as she closed her eyes, trying to get the images she was imagining out of her head.

Ali squeezed Carol’s hand as tears fell silently down her cheeks. The abuse and the pregnancy amid all of the horror was so tragically poignant. The brunette knew that Carol didn’t have any children so she knew something awful happened to the baby. She bit her lip and tried to make herself stop thinking about what it could have been. Carol would tell her if she was strong enough to keep listening.

“I feel like I should just remind you all that I’m sitting right here with you today. I’m ok, aside from my panic attack that is” her voice was calm and soothing and Ashlyn thought how fucked up it was that the woman who had been victimized for more than half of her life was trying to make them feel better. Carol continued her story.

He left her alone for a couple of months, and then, just before she would start to tell her friends and family the good news after the first trimester, it all fell apart again. Morris came home angrier than ever about a case that had gone badly at work. Carol was in the kitchen making dinner and he stumbled in, picked up the frying pan she was about to start cooking with and beat her with it so badly that she lost the baby. That was 1999 and she was 38 years old. He left the house that night, leaving his wife bleeding on the floor of the kitchen, frying pan beside her. She called her lawyer friend and she came over and took some pictures of Carol and the scene before driving her to the hospital. Between those pictures and the hospital’s report stating that the reason for the miscarriage had been severe trauma to the abdomen, Carol had the proof she needed to keep him away from her for good. Of course it wasn’t that simple. Where was she supposed to go? What was she supposed to do? Everything was in his name and he controlled every part of her life. He had cut her off from her brother and the rest of her extended family. He hadn’t allowed her to take a job when they moved to Savannah so she didn’t have her own money. Technically he could call the police and have her arrested for grand theft auto any time she drove her car, which was bought, paid for, insured by and registered in his name.

She hadn’t arranged her escape yet, but she had secured her safety. Her lawyer friend helped her write out her will which included a declaratory statement about the abuse she had endured at his hands with dates and details. Carol left a copy of the document on his bed for him that night. She had already moved all of her things into one of the guest rooms on the opposite side of the huge mansion they shared. She also left him a list of rules that he needed to abide by or she would have her lawyer release a copy of her will to the press. She showed him one of the evidentiary pictures and promised him she had dozens more that were far worse and would clearly indicate a long pattern of abuse at his hands.

Ashlyn could barely sit still in her seat. She wanted to comfort Carol and she wanted to comfort her mom and she wanted to comfort her wife who was still crying silent tears as she held Carol’s hand.
“I would have been so afraid to go to sleep at night” Deb confessed. “With him in the same house? I don’t know how you did it.”

“Well that was part of the deal. If he did anything to me, my lawyer would release my will to the press and his reputation would be ruined. He cared far more for his precious reputation than he did about getting vengeance on me. Thank goodness.”

They all looked warily at each. Everyone looked like they wanted to throw up.

“And, of course, I started sleeping with a loaded pistol in my nightstand and a knife under my pillow” Carol added with a macabre chuckle. “It’s not funny” she apologized. “Not at all. But it made me sleep better.”

There was a period of tumult as they each tried to fit into their new roles. Eventually, he left her alone entirely. She studied and became a real estate agent and realtor and he got older and meaner. She started a new job and became extremely successful, selling many of the most beautiful homes in the area to millionaires and billionaires from all over the South. Carol began to stand on her own, even though she was still using his last name. She spent ten years working and earning her own money so she didn’t have to rely on him for anything. She still spent lots of his money, of course. That had been one of her rules. Carol lived the life she wanted, on his dime, as she saved for a future that she realized she wanted less and less. She was happy where she was. Morris didn’t trouble her any more. She was a success in her own right and making good money. Her car was in her name and she got her own credit cards and established her own financial history and identity. She spent time with her friends whenever she wanted and travelled wherever she desired. The only thing he wouldn’t give her was a divorce. And, for a long time, she told herself she was ok with that.

It took until 2014 for her to officially file for divorce. The straw that broke the camel’s back was sudden and unexpected and had happened at the end of 2013. She met a man who was buying a new home and for the first time in years she felt something for someone again. He knew she was married and refused to pursue the relationship, even though he confessed his love for her. Carol didn’t know if she loved him or not. She didn’t trust any of those feelings anymore. But she couldn’t deny what her heart and body were telling her, whether it was this man or someone else in the future. There was life left in them yet and Carol couldn’t pretend otherwise any longer. She talked with her lawyer friend and filed the papers, knowing Morris would fight her tooth and nail and fight as dirty as he knew how during the divorce. Which is exactly what happened. It took almost a full year for all of his efforts to fail and the divorce was finally official at the end of 2015. It had all gone public. Carol had no choice. If she wanted to have her future, her own real future for the first time in her life, she would have to sacrifice the story of her brutal past. It had almost been cathartic for her as she testified day after day in court against her pig of a husband. Everybody in civilized Savannah was astonished to hear the dirty laundry being aired by one of the most powerful and esteemed couples in the city. It was all anybody talked about for months and months. You either believed Carol and the documented proof she offered and her heart-wrenching testimony, or you didn’t. Sadly, it was about a fifty-fifty split.

“How could anybody not believe you?” Ali’s eyes were wide and she looked shocked as she spoke. “That’s just ridiculous. Like you would make all of that up. And you had the hospital report and the pictures...”

“It’s easy to see my side from where we’re sitting right now” Carol replied evenly. “But Morris was a powerful man with many powerful friends. Some of them were judges and senators and other big shots. It wasn’t just if people believed me or not, unfortunately. They also had to be brave enough to believe that someone they knew and respected could be such a monster.”
And that’s how she came to be in Florida in 2016 when she met a certain temporary employee at her new real estate office. As soon as everything settled from the divorce she packed up very little, there was very little that she wanted to bring with her from that life to her new one, and drove south. A colleague at her real estate office in Savannah knew the owner of the office in Melbourne, Florida and had given Carol a ringing endorsement. It was almost too easy. But Carol knew nothing about it had been easy. She had paid a lifetime’s worth of pain and suffering to finally gain her freedom. And she loved her new life from the first morning she woke up in the hotel in Melbourne. She loved it because it was, for the very first time ever, truly hers. And she loved her new life because it was, for the very first time ever, truly hers. She had paid a lifetime’s worth of pain and suffering to finally gain her freedom. And she loved her new life from the first morning she woke up in the hotel in Melbourne. She loved it because it was, for the very first time ever, truly hers.

“And part of that was befriending a new co-worker, helping her family through some tough times and eventually working up the nerve to kiss her” Carol chuckled as she finished her incredible story.

Tammye was leaning her forehead against Carol’s shoulder as she told her story and was in no hurry to lift her head up. She had been told bits and pieces of the story at different times when Carol felt safe enough to open up to her. But to hear the whole thing at once had taken her breath away and broken her heart. They all sat there for a few minutes, deep in their own thoughts, trying to line up the Carol they knew before the fight in the kitchen with the Carol they knew now. This story and her past was what Ashlyn had picked up on from the very beginning. She always felt like Carol was keeping something from them and from her mother. And the fear of what that might be had caused the keeper to stop herself from fully embracing the new woman in her mother’s life. She understood now, well, she understood as much as she could from her sheltered, fortunate life experience. Any trouble Ashlyn had ever been through paled in comparison to the harrowing story Carol had just shared.

“And have the panic attacks happened often? I can’t imagine it’s easy to just forget that all happened to you. That life you lived was not something people just get over” Ashlyn asked, hesitantly. “And I’m sorry if that’s too personal a question. You don’t have to answer anything just because you shared your story with us.”

“It’s ok Ashlyn” she smiled shyly and put her arm around Tammye to hug her. “The last time I had one was when I was still living with Morris, but after we made our agreement. That time I was out with some friends and some sort of fight broke out on the sidewalk next to the outdoor table where we were eating lunch. My response wasn’t as bad as today. But I guess it’s because nobody actually touched me that time.”

“So because Koty physically touched you...”

“He hit her. He didn’t mean to” Ali clarified and interrupted Ashlyn, “but he hit her. And then he grabbed her, that’s what the scratches on her neck are from, and pulled her down to the floor.”

“You’re right” the keeper nodded. “It doesn’t help to sugar coat it. I’m sorry.”

“I think you’re right too Ash” Carol responded, releasing Tammye from the hug and giving her a gentle squeeze. “Because Koty hit me and grabbed at me, it triggered a much more severe attack. And the fact that it happened in the kitchen was a major trigger. I know that one for sure. Most of the times...he beat me... were in the kitchen. He’d come home and that’s where I’d be, getting dinner started. Or after dinner I’d be cleaning up or just flat out hiding in the kitchen and he’d look for me there. So I think this one was bad because of the combination” she paused for a minute and they all took in her words. Nobody said anything for another minute or two before Carol continued with a small smile on her face. “And then poor Mike tried to help me up” she shook her head.
apologetically. “I don’t know how I’ll ever make it up to him” she chuckled a little.

“Oh don’t worry about that. That’s how I respond to him all the time” Deb teased. “He’s used to it.”

Everybody laughed and then kept laughing, welcoming the release of more tension and anxiety and anger from hearing Carol’s miserable tale. It took them a few minutes to settle down again, almost every woman wiping tears of laughter from her eyes.

“I’m sorry I’ve been holding on to this for so long” Carol looked sheepishly at Ali’s hand, still in her own. “My doctor said that sometimes, to pull myself to safety in my own mind, I’ll latch on to something tangible that helps ground me and keep me from totally losing all my marbles” she chuckled. “I think I’ll be ready to let go soon though.”

“You can hold it as long as you need to” Ali replied with a sweet, sincere smile.

“Do you still see a doctor for the trauma and everything?” Tammye spoke for the first time in a long time and her face was red and splotchy from crying.

“I have a shrink – oh sorry, we’re supposed to call them therapists now, right?” she chuckled again. “I have a therapist who I’ve seen twice since I’ve been down in Florida. My therapist from Savannah set me up just in case I ever needed something. But, really, I’ve been so happy since I’ve been there that it never occurred to me that I would ever need to talk to her again” she smiled ruefully at her girlfriend. “But I’ll go see her when we get home. Just to try and pack this one away and make sure nothing new is going on.”

They talked for another twenty minutes or so, asking Carol questions and telling her how moved they were by her story. Carol eventually let Ali’s hand go and it was almost like she didn’t know she had done it. The brunette sat there and didn’t move her hand at all in case she wasn’t really done with it yet. But after another ten minutes she thought it was safe to bring it back into her own lap. Carol had convinced them all that she was ready to get up and go get herself cleaned up – Ali had left the peeing part out of her re-telling of the story earlier but Carol figured it out from the towel she was sitting on. She explained that it had only happened once before and it only happened during the really powerful panic attacks. She apologized and offered to go get the mess cleaned up but Deb told her it had already been taken care of and not to think about it for another second.

“I can’t thank you ladies enough for helping me. And I hope I haven’t ruined Christmas. What do you think? Should we go have some cheesecake and coffee and check on those baby boys downstairs?”

When they got back down to the kitchen it was as if nothing had happened. Anything that had been disturbed during the fight had been put back where it belonged. The kitchen was spotless. The dogs were all happy and content as were Cash, Johnny and Drew. It had barely been two hours since Kyle and Koty burst through the mudroom door but it felt like a lifetime to the four women who had just been told the story of a lifetime. There was a little bit of tension in the air but, for the most part, everybody had calmed down and cooled off. The only way you could tell that something awful had happened was the ice pack Kyle held against his cheekbone and the bag of frozen peas Nathan had resting on top of his nose as he lay back with his head in Kyle’s lap on the love seat in the quiet of the front parlor. And Koty was still passed out along the banquette bench in the nook at the back of the family room. Ken and Vicki were sitting at the small kitchen table in front of the double-sided fireplace, holding hands and talking in low voices about what to do with the troubled young man.

Tanner and Dom were playing FIFA on the PS4 in the family room while Chris, Beth, Sandi,
Sydney and both Mikes were in the living room watching animated Christmas specials with Cash, Johnny and Drew. Johnny had draped himself across Luna’s body as she lay on her side on the floor. It was one of the cutest things Ashlyn had ever seen and she tried not to disturb anybody when she took a quick picture as she stood just inside the living room. Chris looked up at her with a worried look on his face and she gave him a thumbs up. It only took a couple of seconds for everyone else to look at the keeper expectantly.

“Is she ok?” Mike Harris asked first.

“She’s doing much better. She had a panic attack” Ashlyn explained simply. “So when she comes down just try not to be too loud around her or surprise her or anything like that. Give her nerves a chance to settle down again ok?”

Everybody nodded their heads in agreement. Ali had a similar conversation with Ken and Vicki while Deb updated Kyle and Nathan and then Dom and Tanner. An hour later as they all ate cheesecake and watched ‘A Christmas Story’ in the living room, you’d never know what drama had just gone down in the big old house. Neither Ali nor Ken’s hearts were really in the movie that night, but everybody knew it was their thing and wanted to try and make it work. The brunette nursed Drew while she sat next to her father and tried to enjoy the movie. Ken held Vicki’s hand tightly on his other side as he did the same thing. But none of their thoughts were on the leg lamp or the Bumpus’ dogs or the ‘Red Ryder Carbine Action 200-shot Range Model air rifle with a compass in the stock and this thing which tells time’. Carol and Tammye had come down for dessert but excused themselves early and went up to the third floor and got into bed. No-one could blame them. Ashlyn and Chris were cleaning up the dessert and coffee dishes in the kitchen, happy to have a task to complete.

“When did you ever think something like this would go down, on Christmas no less, and not have a single Harris involved in it?” Chris asked with a smirk as he stood next to his sister at the kitchen sink.

“No shit!” she agreed, raising her eyebrows up to her hairline. “It’s not even close to funny yet and it might never be, I’m not sure” she shook her head. “But how the hell are we not the fuck-ups?”

They both chuckled, nervous because they didn’t want someone to think they were laughing about what had happened. They were quiet again as they finished the dishes that hadn’t fit into the dishwasher and dried their hands.

“What are they going to do with him tonight?” Chris motioned over his shoulder towards the nook on the other side of the house where Koty slept.

“I’m not sure. I haven’t talked to Ali yet” Ashlyn replied. “But I’m thinking I’ll sleep on their couch tonight just in case they need help with him when he wakes up or something. I mean, if he goes wild again...”

“Bash, don’t take this the wrong way, but you wouldn’t be much good for that” he put his arm around his kind sister as they leaned against the counter behind them. “I’ll go sleep on their couch tonight. He can’t hurt me and I don’t make my living as a professional athlete with this body” he flexed and posed and pointed at himself until Ashlyn was giggling uncontrollably.

When dessert had been served a little while earlier, Tanner had walked into the front parlor with two pieces of cheesecake and offered them to Kyle and Nathan. He came back a minute later with his own piece and joined them at the coffee table in front of the love seat. The three ate in comfortable silence for a few minutes before Tanner finally found the courage to say what he had come in there to say.
“I’m sorry for what Koty did, to both of you” he started nervously as his voice wavered a little bit. He kept his eyes on his cheesecake and swallowed. “And I don’t know why he called you...that. He doesn’t think that and I’ve never heard him use that word before” he spoke quickly, in a hurry to get past the hardest part. “I don’t know why he did it but I’m sorry.”

“Tanner, look at me for a sec” Kyle encouraged, his voice calm and kind. When his step-brother looked up and met his eyes he continued. “Thank you for saying that. I really appreciate it. You’re a good guy, one of the best I know. And that’s the truth” he smiled warmly. “He said it to hurt me. And it worked. But that’s not your apology to make bro. That’s on Koty. He’s the only person who’s responsible for what he did tonight. I know you love him like crazy and you’d do anything you could to help him. He’s so lucky to have an awesome brother like you, even if he’s too messed up to see it right now. But you have to promise me something, ok?”

“What?” Tanner looked sad and confused and tired.

“I’m serious, this is really important and I really need you to hear it because I know what I’m talking about when it comes to this shit, ok?”

“Ok.”

“Promise me that you won’t blame yourself for anything that he does, or that he’s already done. Because there’s nothing you can do to stop it. I know. I’ve been there. The only person who can stop Koty is Koty. And that’s just the cold, hard truth. And maybe tonight will be his wake-up call. I don’t know. But if it’s not, he’s going to keep fucking up and doing stupid shit and you have to promise me that you won’t blame yourself for a second. Do you understand?”

“Yeah” Tanner sighed and sounded glum. “Mom and Ken already talked to me and said the same thing.”

“Well they’re right, and that’s good. But I’m coming to you from Koty’s point of view, right? I was Koty, only worse, and I know there was absolutely nothing my sister could have done to help me or keep me from doing the dumbass things I did when I was drinking and using. And part of what made me get my shit together was realizing how much pain I was causing her and the rest of my family. It kills me to this day knowing what I put them through.” His voice broke at the end of his sentence and he cleared his throat. “But I can’t go back and change any of it. What I can do is try to help you and Koty not make the same mistakes I made.”

“Thanks Kyle” he choked out and started to cry.

He dropped his head as his tears started to fall and Kyle got on his knees next to him and wrapped him in a big hug.

“It’s ok bro” he said into the hug. “We’ll get through it together. I’ll do anything I can for you, anytime. I love you Tan.”

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The fallout from Koty’s drugged out display on Christmas was swift and strong. The next afternoon, Ken and Vicki’s living room was full of Harris and Krieger family members. Ashlyn called her therapist, Mattie, bright and early Thursday morning to get a recommendation for a rehab program that she had personal experience with. She explained what had happened the evening before and told her that they were going to strike while the iron was hot and stage an intervention later that afternoon while everybody was still in town and could help. Mattie offered to come and run the intervention for them and then help them, hopefully with Koty’s participation.
and input, select a rehab program that was right for Koty.

Ken was adamant that everybody that Koty had hurt the night before be there so that he could see, actually see with his own eyes, the damage he had done. Mattie agreed with the tactic so Carol, Kyle and Nathan all showed up. All the recovered addicts in the family were there too, Mike Harris, Tammye, Chris, Beth and Kyle. And then the family members that those addicts had hurt while they were living their self-destructive lives took seats in the room as well - Deb, Ken, Ali, and Ashlyn. And then Tanner, Vicki and Koty’s girlfriend, who turned out to be his ex-girlfriend once the whole story surfaced during the intervention, also filled the room as the people Koty was hurting and would continue to hurt with his behavior. Ali couldn’t believe the girl drove back from Vermont just to help Koty out. He had been such a jackass with his drinking that his girlfriend broke up with him and he just didn’t tell anybody. She was tired of being with him when he drank and that had been the final straw for him. That was what pushed him to the bath salts for the first time.

As far as interventions went, Koty’s had been a big success. He was a hostile, dismissive jerk when it started but as he looked at Kyle’s black eye, Nathan’s almost broken nose and the welt on Carol’s cheek and the scratches on her neck, he started to cry and break down. He wasn’t a terrible person. He was a pretty good kid who went to a tough, competitive college and had his hopes dashed when he hadn’t made the soccer team his freshman year. His classes were hard and he watched his younger brother excelling at the same sport he loved so much. Then, when Tanner got his soccer scholarship to Providence College and played off the bench his freshman year, it was an extra slap in the face and more proof that Koty was the failure in the family. Playing in the BC Men’s Rec league had done more harm than good because he was already too lost in his own head to place any value on it. It was like adding insult to injury at that point. And then, when his girlfriend dumped him just before Halloween, he had started to spiral out of control. Kyle, Ashlyn and Ali told their stories of picking him up from campus security. Ken and Vicki had been furious with all three of them the night before when they realized that Koty had played them all. But, with some more time to think and process it, the parents understood that the older half-siblings were just trying to help. They had each given him one shot which is probably what Ken and even Vicki would have done in their shoes.

Kyle and Chris talked to him about how hard it could be living in the shadow of your talented kid sister, or brother in Koty’s case. Ali talked to him about how powerful it had been to transfer to a different school her senior year. Their situations were obviously different, but the fact remained that she needed a fresh start and changing schools had been the best way to do that. She was careful not to promote a semester abroad. That had worked wonders for her but she wasn’t an addict struggling through a tough time. Ashlyn talked to him about growing up and missing her dad who wasn’t always there for her. She also told him how awesome it was to re-establish a relationship with her dad and keep making it stronger year after year after year. Finally, everyone took a turn and told him how much they loved him or believed in him or supported him and asked him to commit to making a change and getting clean and staying clean and living a full life again, with all of them in it. Mattie stayed and talked privately with Ken, Vicki, Tanner and Koty and helped them select a couple of rehab facilities that sounded like the best bet for Koty. Everybody else went back home to lick their wounds and relax after the second emotional afternoon in as many days.

Ashlyn’s idyllic Christmas in New England fantasy had proven to be just that, a fantasy. Her Thursday plans had been derailed by the intervention, but there was no place she would rather have been than trying to help Ken Krieger’s step-son. The twelve Bruins tickets she had bought went up as last minute ticket giveaways on the Knight-Harris Co social media with great reaction and
results from her fans. The rules were that you had to be 18 or older or be able to put someone 18 or older on the phone with you when it was time for the giveaway. You had to wear Boston Breakers garb of some sort to the game. And you had to post about it a few times throughout the game on social media. No exceptions.

Friday Ali and Ashlyn led most of the group on a hike that took almost an hour of active hiking and then drove them around the North shore coast stopping for coffees along the way. Friday night was the night the blonde had been most looking forward to all week, after Christmas of course. She got tickets to ‘The Nutcracker’ and twelve of them got dressed up, drove into Boston, enjoyed a fancy dinner and then experienced the ballet together. Ken and Vicki stayed home with Koty and Tanner and Sydney and Sandi were more than happy to take their places. And Mike Christopher and Dom stayed home at Sandi’s house with Cash, Johnny and Drew. They jokingly called it boys’ night. Ali was nervous as hell to leave Drew and Beth was worried too, but Vicki assured them that she and Ken would just have Dom and Mike bring the boys over and they would collectively watch them until everybody got home.

The problem with bringing twelve people to watch ‘The Nutcracker’ was that Ashlyn didn’t get to sit next to her beautiful wife. She had to settle for sitting behind her and trying to watch the side of her face as the brunette enjoyed one of her favorite things in the world. Ali sat between her mother and her brother just as they used to do when they all lived in the Boston area. It was a nice trip down memory lane and she loved every minute of it. But, it almost surprised her to think it, she missed sitting next to Ashlyn and sharing the tradition with her. Even though she was behind her, not more than two feet away, she still missed having her long fingers on her thigh or intertwined with hers. She reminded herself that this year was special and would probably not happen again for a very long time, if ever. That got her back into the right, grateful, frame of mind pretty quickly. And, as if she could read her mind, Ashlyn leaned forward and pressed a warm kiss into her cheek.

“I’d rather be holding your hand, but the view from back here’s not so bad” she breathed into Ali’s ear and smiled into another quick kiss right by her ear. “I love you baby.”

And on Saturday Ashlyn’s fantasy Christmas got the break she was hoping for. It had started snowing early Saturday morning and by the time people started waking up there was almost six inches on the ground. It was the thick, flaky snow too. Great for snowballs and snowmen but more difficult to shovel. The blonde tried to contain her excitement and let Ali sleep as long as possible. She got up and got dressed as quietly as she could. She went down to the mudroom and pulled out all the winter hats, gloves, scarves, mittens and boots she could find. She drank her coffee and ate some breakfast, still the only one up in the whole house. By the time she had shoveled off the steps to the mudroom door and the front porch and walkway and part of the driveway it was finally 8:00am. She ran back inside the house and was thrilled to see people up and dressed and finishing their breakfast.

“Good job people! Keep it moving now. After you’ve eaten make sure you go to the bathroom and then put your snow gear on and get your butts outside. It’s beautiful out there in the snow!”

She took her boots and outerwear off and ran up the backstairs. Drew was happily playing with his octopus toy in the middle of their bed, fully dressed while Ali was pulling a sweater on over her turtleneck by the dressers. The keeper couldn’t help but stop in her tracks, frozen by the beautiful sight of her wife smiling at her from across the room. The feeling of sheer joy inside Ashlyn almost took her breath away as she stood there grinning from ear to ear with her dimple on full display. For a few seconds she flashed back to the morning after the Super Bowl almost four years earlier. This was what was supposed to happen back then. This beauty in front of her was supposed to go out and play in the snow with her like they were little kids again. Ashlyn felt the same excitement at the idea of taking Ali by the hand and leading her out into the snow for a morning full of silly,
childish fun. Yes, this was how it was supposed to be, but even better because they would bring their baby son with them too.

It was their last day of Christmas vacation before flying back to Florida the next morning and the Harrises enjoyed the hell out of it. They played in the snow all morning long, going inside for breaks when their feet or hands got too cold or wet. Johnny experienced his first snow and Beth took a million pictures as he rolled around in it and then cried because it was cold and wet inside his collar. He tried to chase the dogs around the yard as they bounded through the now almost ten inches of snow. Everybody had fun in the snow that morning. The Ipswich crew drove down as soon as they were able to get out of their driveways, except for Vicki and Koty. The good-natured and sweet play with Cassius and Johnny eventually turned into a pretty classic snowball fight once the little ones went inside for lunch and naps. The Southerners who didn’t really know what they were doing turned out to be fast learners as they teamed up with Ashlyn and nearly defeated the Northern contingent. But the yanks weren’t going to lose a snowball fight to a bunch of warm weather beach bums. Not that day, not ever. They staged a furious final assault and when the snow settled, Ali was laying on top of her wife with a victorious grin on her face. Her nose crinkled as she laughed, slightly out of breath from all the running and throwing. Ashlyn wrapped her nearly numb arms around her waist and held her close as she brought their lips together in a chilly but loving kiss.

They drank hot cocoa in the afternoon and roasted marshmallows over the fire in the double-sided fireplace between the kitchen and family room. They ate and drank and sang along to Christmas carols and watched the last of the Christmas movies they could find. There were wet hats and gloves and mittens and scarves and coats and jeans and socks draped all over the backs of chairs and anyplace else they could get dried out. The dogs were tired from their busy morning and they whimpered in their dreams, reliving the fun. Ali felt her wife’s strong arms wrap around her waist from behind as she lay Drew down in his crib for a nap. She moved her hands to cover Ashlyn’s on her stomach and they both looked at their son as he fell asleep in record time, cheeks still a little pink from their morning outside.

“I’ve been wishing all week for snow for Johnny” Ashlyn said softly, mouth moving close to her wife’s ear. “And I just realized that, even though I’m glad he got to play in his very first snow, I really wanted this snow for me. And for you” she kissed just below Ali’s ear and felt the brunette nuzzle into it. “You’re always the first person I want to do things with and tell things to. You’re always the one I’m going to play in the snow with Ali. You’re always going to be the one I get excited to share things with” she paused for a few seconds as her voice started to catch in her throat. “You’re always going to be the one.”
Smut warning (sorry, I know it’s been a while but the plot got in the way...lol).

“Oh yeah sexy” Ashlyn moaned with a smirk on her face as Ali pushed her backwards through the mudroom.

“I’ve been waiting all fucking night for this” Ali growled out, her eyes dark and head tilted low as she ravished the blonde with her eyes. “You’re all mine now” she continued as she stepped out of her heels, tossed her coat on the bench and stalked her prey with steely determination. “You’d better take that nice suit off or I’m gonna rip it off of you” she warned.

Ashlyn was still a little drunk and they were both completely turned on. It was almost 2:00am and they had just rung in the New Year at a party in Boston. The lesbian club held a black tie New Year’s Eve party that had been way more fun than either of them expected. They had gone with Niki and Molly, both couples dropping their children off at parents’ houses for the night, and run into Sarah and Erin there. They danced and drank and laughed until their faces and feet hurt. Ashlyn had forgotten how funny Sarah could be, when she felt comfortable and when people actually took the time to pay attention to her. There was something different about her too. She was more confident now and louder, in general, with her opinions and comments and jokes. She had blossomed under Erin’s care and both women looked at each other with complete adoration and love. It was plain to see. Even the keeper, who had been hesitant to embrace their new friendship with the couple, could tell they were madly in love with each other. Molly and Niki enjoyed getting to know them better too. They had mingled at a few gatherings over the past couple of years, Breakers games or Pride games or bigger parties, but that night was the first time they had socialized in such a small group. Molly and Sarah hit it off instantly. They were both smart and a little bit more bookish and intellectual than everybody else. All six women were smarter than average, but Niki, Ashlyn and Erin were definitely not quite on the same level as the two brainiacs. Ali was comfortably in between the two groups in terms of intellectualism.

After a couple of hours Molly pulled Ali to the ladies room with her and gushed about how great Sarah was.

“When you and Syd first told me about her I don’t know, I just got the wrong idea in my head I guess” the pregnant woman explained as they touched up their make-up after washing their hands. “She’s awesome though” she enthused.

“Well, I hate to break it to you Mol, but we’re both married and Sarah only has eyes for Erin now...”

Molly giggled and rolled her eyes.

“No, God, I don’t mean I want to go home with her or anything” she chuckled. “But now that I know her better I kind of get why it was hard for you to end things. That’s all.”

They joined the other four women, who were all drunk by that point, and enjoyed the rest of the night’s festivities. Ali had one drink when they first got there and then stopped drinking because
she was driving. She would have some champagne at midnight and that would be it for her. Ashlyn
got and stayed pleasantly drunk all night long. She fawned all over her beautiful wife,
complimenting her and flattering her every chance she got. Sarah quirked an eyebrow at the
brunette as it neared midnight, surprised by how clingy and cloying the keeper was acting that
night. Ali just shrugged her shoulders and smiled back. It was a little over the top but she could
never be anything other than grateful when her wife showered her with affection. She wished
Ashlyn would tone it down a little bit though, but as soon as she registered that thought in her brain
she chastised herself for it. What would she have given to have somebody declare their love for her
so steadfastly while she hid her heart away for those four lonely years?

“Uh oh” Niki said loudly with a grin on her own drunk face. “Harris is going to the sweet side
again!” She laughed when Ashlyn blushed and rolled her eyes at her. “Mothers, lock up your
daughters!” Niki teased loudly and laughed some more.

Ali rescued her wife and pulled her in close, wrapping her in a hug and kissing her cheek.

“She’s teasing me cuz I love you so much baby” she slurred out against the brunette’s neck.

“She doesn’t get like this often” Niki hugged them both, invading their private little moment. “But
when she does she just says whatever’s in her heart and there’s nothing you can do to stop her” she
smiled. “It’s super sweet and romantic but it’s deadly for her chill reputation.”

Ali found it not only sweet and romantic, but sexy as hell too. How the fuck lucky was she to have
one of the hottest chicks in the room fawning all over her like a lovesick puppy? That kind of
attention did things to her. Naughty things. They had been touchy all night, it was hard not to be
with Ashlyn in her current state. But as the night wore on the touches got more intimate and lasted
longer. By the time they had shared their heated kiss at midnight they were flagrantly eye-fucking
one another and Erin even drunkenly called them out on it, making everybody laugh and then tease
them some more. The sweetness of the blonde’s affections slowly grew darker and needier. By the
time they got to Ali’s truck for the drive home they could barely keep their hands off of each other.
They made out desperately for another ten minutes before Ali pulled away from the club and
started the 50 minute drive back to the big old house.

“Goddamn I wish I still lived in Stoneham” Ali husked out as she watched her wife out of the
corner of her eye and drove past her old exit. “Fuck.”

The inside of the truck was too big for them to get very close to each other. Ashlyn could reach her
hand over the console between their seats and squeeze the brunetted’s thigh but they had passed that
level of touching an hour ago. She picked up Ali’s hand and brought it to her lips, leaning over and
resting her own elbow on the console to bridge the gap. Ashlyn slowly worked her lips all around
her wife’s knuckles and fingers as she held her hand. Ali moaned at the touch and got even louder
when the keeper began sucking on her fingers, putting each one inside her mouth and working over
it with her hot tongue. It was sweet torture because all Ali could think about when she saw the look
on Ashlyn’s face and heard the sounds of her lips and tongue sucking on her fingers was how
much she wanted to feel all of that between her legs right that minute. Twenty minutes into the
longest drive of their lives the blonde leaned even farther over the console and let her wife taste her
long fingers, loving the way Ali’s lips closed around each finger tightly and sucked hard on them.

“Now let me taste them with you on them” the brunette panted out when Ashlyn pulled them away.

The keeper was just drunk enough to throw caution to the wind and risk distracting her wife as she
drove on the highway. She settled back into her seat and scooched down so her ass was near the
very front of her seat. She struggled to get her belt undone and fancy suit pants unzipped but finally
managed it, slipping her right hand inside her tight boyshorts with a moan.
“Fuck, I’m so wet” she groaned.

“Put your seat back” Ali instructed, watching everything as best she could while still keeping the truck on the highway. They had about another fifteen minutes before their exit and then she would have to really pay attention to the road. “Hurry up.”

“So bossy” Ashlyn quirked an eyebrow at her horny wife and chuckled, low in her throat. She reclined her seat and lay back, easily able to get her hand between her legs and more. The blonde knew what her wife wanted and she was only too happy to oblige. She lifted her hips and slid her pants and underwear down below her knees, spreading her legs out wide. Ali reached her right hand out almost as far as it would go and squeezed her keeper’s warm, naked thigh as it pressed up against the console.

“Jesus you’re beautiful babe” she exhaled, not even aware she had been holding her breath. Ashlyn was very wet and she slid her fingers through her soaked folds and then into her burning core.

“Ohhhh yeahh...” she moaned again.

“Fuck” Ali replied hoarsely, her voice dripping with want.

“Whatever you say baby” Ashlyn purred in response and started pumping her fingers in and out of her pussy. “Mmmmmmm...”

The brunette bit her bottom lip and squeezed her keeper’s leg again, urging her on. The sounds of Ashlyn’s palm slapping against her wet center were driving Ali insane. She considered pulling over for a split second, but that would only delay their arrival even longer. No, this would have to do for the time being.

“Look what you do to me, sexy” the blonde teased, speaking the words slowly and licking her lips as she uttered the nickname.

“Fuck Ash.”

The keeper brought her other hand to her clit and started rubbing it. She went in a slow circle at first but then sped up and changed to a hard and fast pace when she heard her wife’s voice again.

“Come for me babe” Ali urged. “Fuck I wish my mouth was on you, licking you up and sucking on your sweet pussy.”

Ashlyn increased both the rubbing and the thrusting and couldn’t believe how hot this was. If somebody had told her a story about masturbating in the front seat of her wife’s truck she wouldn’t have paid it much attention. But seeing how worked up Ali was and hearing the desire in her voice and seeing the hunger in her eyes made the whole thing feel electric and intense. She was so close to her release and she was about to ask the brunette to put her fingers in her mouth again to give her one final push over the edge.

“Fuck!” Ali yelled as she watched, helplessly and frustratingly.

She dug her short nails deep into Ashlyn’s soft flesh and grabbed her thigh with more strength than she meant to use. She couldn’t help it, she was so turned on and the way Ashlyn’s breathing was getting ragged and the way she was trying to angle herself closer to her was just too much.
“Aliiiiiiii...” she shouted as the orgasm took her.

She crunched her abs and almost sat up for a couple of seconds and then her body started to shake. Her knees both hit the glove compartment in front of her and she held tightly to Ali’s hand, still dug into her thigh. It was a pretty good orgasm for what it was and where they were, but it was over quickly and only seemed to make the blonde ache even more for her wife’s touch.

“Jesus Christ you’re killing me” the brunette groaned, panting a little bit herself. “Put your fingers in my mouth right now.”

The truck turned off the highway and Ali drove the final fifteen minutes home sucking and licking every bit of her keeper’s juices off of her long fingers. Ashlyn teased her too, pulling her fingers out of her mouth and making the brunette lean forward to get them again. She pulled her pants up and held them together with her hand as they walked quickly into the house. She knew they weren’t going to be on for much longer, not the way Ali was looking at her. Ashlyn let her wife push her back through the mudroom and across the hall into the dining room, ignoring the dogs as they whined their greeting and begged for attention. She watched her beautiful brunette toss her coat, take off her heels and start working her way out of the sexy, red sleeveless dress she had worn the fuck out of all night long. When Ali told her to take her suit off she had no other thought but to comply. She loved when she was bossy like this. Fuck yes! Ashlyn let her pants drop and shrugged out of her suitjacket in a matter of seconds. The buttons on her dress shirt posed a bigger problem but Ali had the solution. Ashlyn couldn’t hide the shock or the subsequent desire that swept across her face as she watched the brunette rip her dress shirt open, popping the buttons off like a fucking boss.

“Fuck that’s hot” she managed to choke out as she lowered her boyshorts with the image of baby New Year on the ass, down past her knees.

Ali’s eyes were drawn instantly to her keeper’s neatly trimmed curls and she knelt down in front of her once Ashlyn had backed up into the dining room table and couldn’t move anymore. The blonde took her shirt off and removed her bra so she was completely naked with the back of her ass leaning up against the table. She moved her hands to the back of Ali’s head and held her against her hot, wet pussy. The low groan that came out of her throat went on for more than a minute and got louder by the second. The sound spurred the brunette on and she pressed her wife up against the heavy table, happy that it didn’t slide away under the force.

“All. Fucking. Mine.” Ali said the words with her thick tongue and licked and sucked Ashlyn’s folds between each one. “Mmmmmmmmm...”

She used her hands and helped the blonde step out of her underwear as her mouth continued to work on Ashlyn’s core. Ali was on fire and felt like she was going to come undone herself just from how turned on she was. She squeezed her thighs together, hoping for some relief, but none came. She was impatient and frustrated and starting to get overwhelmed. Ali stood up and moved her lips to Ashlyn’s neck while her hands squeezed the blonde’s breasts, harder than usual.

“Oh, fuck Al, Mmmmm” Ashlyn moaned as she grabbed two handfuls of the brunette’s firm ass.

Ali nipped at her neck and then licked it, moving up behind her ear and then across her jaw. She slid her thigh in between her keeper’s legs and pressed against her core, loving how wet and slippery it felt. Ali brought their lips together in a hard, bruising kiss that they fought for control of. Ashlyn knew her wife was going to win that battle but she wasn’t going to let her have all the fun without putting up some resistance. They made out aggressively with strong tongues pushing against each other and teeth hitting and biting soft lips. Without any warning, Ali pulled her tongue out of the blonde’s mouth and turned her around so Ashlyn’s back was to her front. Ashlyn loved
It was easy to forget how strong her wife was sometimes, just because she didn’t often show her strength off.

The brunette pushed her keeper down onto the table, her hand firmly in her back while her other hand caressed her gorgeous ass. Ali bent over and dropped hot kisses all down her back and ended her travels with a hard bite to that ass.

“Ow!”

The brunette soothed the mark she had made with her tongue and then stepped back for a second to take her panties off. She pressed her crotch up against Ashlyn’s ass and started grinding against it, keeping her hands on the blonde’s hips for a few minutes.

“Oh, baby, you want my ass now?” Ashlyn teased and smirked over her shoulder as she arched her back and stuck her ass out farther. “Yeah girl, get it.”

Ali moved a dining room chair out of the way with her leg and then spread Ashlyn’s legs apart so she would be able to get where she wanted with her hand. She had never loved that table more than she did right that moment. It was so heavy that it wasn’t moving, so Ali was able to move her left hand around her wife’s body and fondle her breasts while bringing her right hand down her ass and between her legs. She ran her fingers through the wetness there, feeling her heart rate increase and her blood start to pump even faster. Ali would never get over the way fucking Ashlyn made her whole body feel. The pleasure was almost painful sometimes, especially if there had been prolonged teasing involved as there had been that night. She shuddered when she pushed two fingers into Ashlyn’s wet and ready pussy. She closed her eyes for a second and fought off a powerful wave of desire that threatened to make her pass out.

“Fuck” she breathed out, her forehead bent over against Ashlyn’s back as she started to thrust and kept working up her wife’s breasts. “I’m gonna come before you do babe. Jesus fucking Christ you’re sexy.”

“Well why don’t you let me...”

“No” Ali replied with a grunt and pinched the blonde’s nipple. “I want to feel you all over me Ash. Everywhere” she moaned out as her eyes closed again.

She was done messing around. Ali pulled her keeper’s hips towards her a little bit, still pumping inside her, until there was room for her to reach around her sexy blonde and get her hand on her clit.

“Oh fuck. Unnnnhhh. Yesssss...unnnhhh...” Ashlyn’s moans were getting louder and lower.

Ali moved a tiny bit to her left and pressed her mound up against Ashlyn’s strong leg as she continued pumping fast and hard. She missed watching her breasts bounce and kissing her hot mouth but she wasn’t stopping to reposition. No fucking way. The brunette bent over again and bit the blonde’s shoulder lightly while her other hand worked on her clit. It didn’t take long. Ashlyn was soaking Ali’s hands with another wave of her passion as she came undone in her wife’s arms only a few seconds later. She slammed her hands down on the table as she came hard, feeling her knees go weak at the same time. Ali felt it too and pressed her harder against the table to try and support her, not wanting to pull her fingers out just yet. She could feel her own juices starting to slide down the inside of her thighs and moaned again as her wife thrashed around in her orgasm.

When she finally stopped moving, Ashlyn became aware of her wife’s hungry tongue lapping her passion up between her legs and at the tops of her thighs as she tried to catch her breath after the
strong orgasm.

“Goddamn that was good” she smiled and then smirked, her cheek flat against the cool table top.

Ali was on her knees, holding onto one of Ashlyn’s legs as she continued cleaning her up with her tongue. The brunette’s other hand was between her own legs, moving through her drenched folds and slowly circling her aching clit. Ashlyn felt her wife’s irregular breathing against her sensitive folds and slowly came back to life. She straightened up and stepped backwards over the top of Ali and away from the table. She smirked when she heard the brunette groan as her delicious treat was taken away from her.

“Where are you going” she whined. “I’m not done yet.”

Ashlyn pulled her beautiful brunette to her feet and turned her around so they could kiss and nuzzle and hold each other for a few minutes.

“I love you so much baby” she breathed out against Ali’s red, swollen lips. “And I could kiss these lips all night long and never get enough of them.” She bent her knees and lifted her wife onto the top of the dining room table, smiling when she heard the surprised gasp escape those lips. “But first, I’m going to fuck you on this table until you scream my name out loud” she husked out and then brought their lips together in a searing kiss that made them both moan and gasp into it. Ashlyn pushed her brunette back so she lay flat on her back and climbed on top of the table with her, crawling up her gorgeous body and avoiding the low-hanging light fixture above the middle of the table. “Are you ready?” she smirked again.

“Fuck yes.”

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January and February continued to be some of the best times for the couple. For the second year in a row, they enjoyed some real quality time together during the blonde’s off-season. That time was when they connected deeply with each other and recharged the big battery that kept their relationship motoring throughout the long and hectic year. If they could get it charged adequately during those two months of relative peace and quiet, they knew they could make it through the next ten months with only a few, well-timed weekends for themselves to re-connect. Those two months had always been special for them, the only exception was the year Gram died. And although their relationship had started off with a dubious two year run of relationship-testing fuck-ups in the month of January, 2020 marked the second consecutive year that they bucked that trend. The struggle to adapt to Drew’s changing needs within their own schedules continued to be challenging, but they cruised through the first two months of the year like old pros.

Their whole world changed early in January when their seven-month old son started crawling. Both Ashlyn and Ali were ecstatic at the development and proud of his accomplishment. Short, adorable videos of the baby on the move zipped from Gloucester to Miami, NYC, Satellite Beach, and Ipswich. It was wonderful but terrifying. He was now mobile. He had figured out that he was capable of transporting himself from room to room. And, to nobody’s surprise, he was fast and determined. The big old house became equipped with several baby gates as quickly as possible. They had always used a few basic gates for the dogs but they had never had to worry about them being truly functional or strong. The dogs were afraid of the gates because one had fallen during an escape attempt when they were puppies and scared the hell out of both dogs. Even typically fearless Fred. Ashlyn could just lean the dog gate up against whatever opening she wanted to block off and the dogs never got closer than a foot to it. It was easy. Not so with the baby gates. Drew was a pretty cautious baby, thankfully. Cash had been a climber and Ali learned the hard way what could happen if you turned your head away for second with an active, climbing toddler. She never
did tell Sydney how her son climbed halfway up the face of the six-foot tall bookshelf in the living room in the eight seconds that Ali had turned her back to reach for a toy.

The biggest problem had been keeping Drew out of the dogs’ water bowl. That became an ongoing dilemma with no good solution. The dogs liked to be with Drew and vice versa so keeping them separated had never worked well. Drew cried for them and they whined for him. But if the learning parents allowed them in the same space they either had to deny the dogs their water or try their hardest to keep Drew from splashing around in their big water bowl. Sometimes if the water level was low enough Drew would pick the bowl up and dump it over himself. The kid loved water, and Ashlyn wasn’t that upset about it. They started picking the dog’s bowl up as a solution, but then came home one afternoon to realize they hadn’t put it back down before they left the dogs alone for the day. Oops. It was a work in progress.

Drew became more and more vocal as he learned to make different sounds with different parts of his mouth. He was good at grabbing and picking up things and becoming more active all the time. He was starting to sleep longer at night and be awake more during the day. Their little baby was growing up. Ashlyn was horrified at how difficult it was to soothe a baby who was teething. Ali had borne the brunt of Drew’s first two teeth, right in the middle of his lower jaw. But January saw the eruption of two pearly whites, two weeks apart, right in the middle of his upper jaw. The brunette encouraged her distraught wife and reassured her that there wasn’t much you could do except try and help him ease the pain with one of the dozens of teething rings and tools they had. It hurt when babies got their teeth. That’s just the way it was.

“Just be thankful you’re not the one with your nipple in between those teeth” she joked one evening towards the end of the month as they had dinnertime in the kitchen. “That is about as much fun as it sounds” she chuckled and rolled her eyes as she fed their son with a tiny spoon.

“Yeah, no, I’m good” Ashlyn winced at the thought and shook her head as she ate. “That just doesn’t seem like good planning to me. I mean, your body, or my body, a woman’s body is designed to give birth. It’s the most amazing feat of human engineering I’ve ever seen. But adding teeth into the breastfeeding program seems like a mistake.”

“I won’t argue with you” the brunette replied as she grinned at their son who had just giggled. “But we don’t want him toothless either, then he can’t eat anything but breastmilk.”

“Oh, right. I forgot about that” the keeper shrugged, a little embarrassed. “We can’t have our little shark without any teeth, now can we?”

Whitney and Ryan came back to the big old house to move the rest of her things out the second week of January. They were officially the tenants of a beautiful house in Cambridge that a Harvard University professor was subletting to them while on sabbatical. It was supposed to be a two-year sabbatical and, if everything went well, the Flanagans would get to live there for both years. The newlyweds stayed with the Kriegers for that week but then, once they moved their bed and the last few things from the big old house out, they were gone. It was very bittersweet for all four of them. Ali and Whitney had become very close over the past four years and both knew that sometimes, no matter how much they loved Ashlyn, they needed the other to handle her or get through to her or help her. It had been so simple when they were all living together. Now, with a 50-minute drive separating them, it would be more difficult. Ryan had come to appreciate Ashlyn and Ali for everything they gave to his wife that he hadn’t been able to for those four years. It was extremely difficult to be separated from her so much of the year, but he took tremendous comfort in the fact that they were taking care of her and loving her like the family that they were. And the two best friends just couldn’t even talk about it, even as Ashlyn helped load boxes into and out of the moving truck. They moved along through that week as if they were helping somebody else pack
and move to a different city. Ignorance truly was bliss.

The upside to the move was that there was now a nice, welcoming home to visit in Cambridge any time they wanted or needed to. It was a lot closer to the Breakers’ facility than Gloucester, that was for sure. If Ashlyn wanted to, she could go home with Whitney for lunch between their morning and afternoon training sessions. As they closed the doors on the last load for the moving van Ashlyn and Whitney hugged and said goodbye. The disconnect that had happened between Ali and Sydney was still fresh in Ashlyn’s mind and she would do anything to avoid that happening with Whitney. The keeper promised herself that she would make time in her life for her best friend no matter what. She also realized it was going to be much easier for her than it had been for Ali because Ashlyn spent almost every day at work with Whitney. She was going to appreciate every single moment, knowing it was the defender’s final season before retiring.

And Whitney was the ultimate professional. True to her word, she went and met with the Breakers’ coaching staff and front office people as soon as she had returned from her honeymoon in November. They thanked her for her honesty and for giving them enough time to formulate a plan to try and replace her. Whitney’s only request had been that if they weren’t going to play her then just release her and she would retire before the season started. She couldn’t bear the thought of riding the bench all season long and mentoring some rookie center back they drafted to try and take her place. The coach promised her that he wouldn’t do that. He expected her to be the team captain again and to play every minute of every match again and lead them to a Championship victory on their home pitch in October.

Ashlyn was having a much different conversation with the head coach during her meeting in January. She was still the team’s starting goalkeeper but Abby Smith was very talented and pushing for more starts. She was getting called up to the National Team and groomed to be the starter there in a few more years. Ashlyn was still one of the best keepers in the league, as well as one of the most popular players, including National Teamers, in the whole league. Every time Abby Smith started an away game the fans in that city complained about not getting to see Ashlyn play. Likewise, team management took a lot of grief from Breakers’ fans who wanted to see the popular and charismatic blonde between the pipes every time Smith got the nod at home. It was a tricky situation for everybody. They were both great players who could be, and probably should be, starting every game. But Boston didn’t want to trade Abby because Ashlyn was near the end of her playing career and everybody knew it. Last season Ashlyn started three games for every one that Abby started. That was a rough estimate because Ashlyn missed a couple of games after the baby was born. This season the coach told her that she would start two games to every one for Abby. He was honest with his star goalkeeper and told her that she still had his full faith and confidence.

The NWSL Draft took place Friday, January 17th down in Atlanta. The 2020 season would welcome two more new teams, bringing the total to fourteen teams. The Vancouver Greys were the first NWSL team to be located in Canada although there were rumors that one of the next group of teams to join in the following few years would be in Toronto. The second team to join for 2020 was the Atlanta Fever and they were celebrating the new club and marketing like crazy while they hosted the draft that January. Ashlyn had promised Lifetime TV and the league that she would host the draft onsite that year. She fulfilled her obligation with a combination of professionalism and charming goofiness that was uniquely Ashlyn. The league teamed her with Kelley O’Hara, who was going to be the National Team star for the Fever, and the two women worked well together. O’Hara was not one of Ashlyn’s favorite people to play against and the Breakers and Sky Blue were ‘rivals’ in the NWSL so they tended to play each other a lot. O’Hara was aggressive and feisty and the kind of player you wanted on your team and hated to play against. She played to the last echo of the whistle and pushed the envelope sometimes in terms of legal tackles and reckless tackles. But away from the pitch she was fun and goofy and she and the keeper hit it off once they
got past their past goals scored and shots saved. The league wanted all fourteen teams to follow Boston and Chicago’s leads and have some players at their home facility ‘covering’ the draft and live tweeting and blitzing social media with live videos. Lifetime TV would have a camera in each team’s building that the live broadcast could cut to at any time. Whitney, Kristie Mewis and Morgan Andrews handled the job for the Breakers and did a pretty good job. They missed having Ashlyn there but were still better than almost all of the other teams. On the whole, the coverage of the Draft was better than ever, even getting attention from some of the more mainstream sports media. It was a good start to the new season.

The day after Ashlyn returned home from Atlanta she went to see her Cambridge tattoo artist, Naomi, to get some more ink done. This one had been in the works for a while and the keeper was very excited. She had wanted to get a sailing schooner tattooed someplace but wasn’t sure exactly how to work it in with everything else on her body. After a lot of thought and design work with Naomi, the blonde was finally ready to commit the artwork to the back of her right thigh. She had planned to leave the rest of her upper right leg alone so the only tattoo there would be Ali’s siren. She didn’t want to crowd that special piece and she liked that it had its’ own area. That’s how important it was to Ashlyn.

At first she designed the schooner to sit on her lower left hip, below the beautiful and colorful flowers and butterflies that adorned her entire left side. But she wanted the schooner to be black and grey only and didn’t think it would look right with all the colors already there. The schooner was at sail, moving from left to right as you looked at it. There was a huge full moon behind the ship, low on the water, almost eight inches wide and covering most of Ashlyn’s muscular thigh. The black ink schooner had two masts, the taller mainmast closer to the rear or stern, and the shorter foremast closer to the front or bow of the ship. Both of the square sails, the mainsail and foresail, were up and half-full. At the very front of the schooner, attached to the tip of the bowsprit or widowmaker, were two smaller, triangular sails, the staysail and the jib, also half-full. There was an American flag proudly flying from the gaff which was the wooden spar that ran across the top of the mainsail. The water below the schooner was relatively calm and there was a shallow reflection of the ship’s shadow in the moonlight on the water.

It became clear to both Ashlyn and Naomi that the best place to put this beauty was the back of her right thigh. The tip of the bowsprit would extend around to the side of her thigh but stay below the siren’s outstretched right arm. Similarly, the stern of the schooner would end up on her inner thigh, as would most of the American flag. Part of the reason the keeper wanted to get a sailing ship done was because of the importance of the big old house and Captain Leighton to her. She credited both with bringing she and Ali together. The other reason Ashlyn wanted the schooner tattoo was so that she could incorporate her growing family into it and forever on her body. The schooner’s name and date of construction was visible along the top board of the ship towards the bow, ‘Mary Sarah, 1875’. It was a replica of Captain Leighton’s favorite schooner. And along the length of the mainmast, written so you had to turn your head to the side to read it, read ‘Andrew Holatka Krieger 5/27/19’. Their next child’s name would go along the foremast. And if they had a third the keeper would get creative and include the letters and numbers someplace else in the rigging or across one of the gaffs that held the sails up. Ashlyn ultimately decided that the schooner was significant enough to share her upper right leg with the siren. The more she thought about it, the more sense it made, until finally she couldn’t imagine anything else going there.

“Oh Ashlyn, it’s incredible” her emotional wife choked out after staring at the fresh ink for a solid five minutes. “Just...beautiful honey. Just like you” she snifflled and gave her keeper a crooked smile as she fought her emotions.

“Are you sure the location’s ok?” Ashlyn asked softly as she tried to look at the brunette from her position lying flat on her stomach on their bed.
“Well you can’t change it now can you?” Ali chuckled and playfully smacked the blonde’s butt. She wiped the tears from her face as she continued to take in the new ink. “To be honest, I always liked having that whole leg to myself, upper leg anyway” she chuckled again and ran her hand down her keeper’s right calf which was covered in tattoos. “But the ‘Mary Sarah’ looks perfect there babe. Just perfect.”

“She does, doesn’t she?” Ashlyn’s voice raised in excitement. “She just belongs there, close to you.” She paused for a minute. “I had Naomi draw her sailing towards you, as if you were calling her home.”

“That means you’re the ‘Mary Sarah’...”

“I know. That wasn’t the plan when it started, but by the time we were done with the design it was so clear to me...” she stopped talking.

Ali crawled up the bed and lay down next to her wife, caressing her back and shoulder with her left hand. Ashlyn rolled onto her left side and cupped the brunette’s face as she brought their lips together in a slow, deep kiss.

“It makes perfect sense. You’re fast and light but strong enough to carry ten times your weight. You’ll sail our son and our family through every hardship and across every stormy sea. You’ll keep them safe and warm and dry even in the toughest conditions...”

“And you’ll lead us home, every time.”
Babies Grow Fast

Elizabeth Linda Harris was born on January 24th, 2020. Both she and Beth were happy and healthy and Chris was as relieved as hell. Beth’s second pregnancy had been more difficult than her first, and not just because they were chasing Johnny around at the same time. She just didn’t feel good at all. It took much more out of her this time around and Chris had convinced himself that the delivery was going to be that much harder too. But Beth had done great. Lizzy was big and healthy and loud and hungry from the minute she made her debut. Chris wanted to honor his grandmothers as he had his grandfathers when they named Johnny. One of Beth’s grandmothers had been Elizabeth too, in addition to it being Grandma Lilian’s middle name, so it was an easy choice for the couple to make. And they liked the way Linda sounded with it instead of Marie, but they would have been happy with either of Gram’s names. Chris really didn’t like his aunt Marie, at all, and although he would never admit it, that had been the deciding factor for him.

Ashlyn and Ali were both thrilled to finally have a baby girl in their lives to spoil. It was about time! They had planned a two-week vacation to Florida the last week of February and first week of March and meeting their new niece was going to be their very first stop. The second week was going to be a working vacation for Ali, but she didn’t care. She just wanted to be near her little family as much as she could during that special time of their year. Part of the reason for the timing of the vacation was so they could fly Meg back home to DC after she spent her February vacation week with them in the big old house. Hannah and Dev got married on Saturday February 15th and then flew up to Boston with Meg the next day before getting on a flight for their honeymoon. Meg was turning eight years old in only three weeks and Ashlyn was very happy to be getting some time with her when she normally wouldn’t. A whole week’s visit in February was a dream come true for both the keeper and the little girl. Ashlyn had been nervous about having to split her time between Drew and Meg so she arranged a few day trips to visit friends and family in case she needed help. Meg got to check out Whitney’s new house on two different days that week and visit Molly and Noah at their house one afternoon as well. On Friday she went in to the office in Cambridge with Ali for the morning to see what she did for her job. The little girl had been amazed when she saw Ali come home from work in her business outfit for the first time Monday afternoon. Both Ali and Ashlyn kept expecting Meg to change her mind about going to work with the brunette, but Thursday night she tugged Ali by the hand to show her the clothes she had picked out to wear the next morning. It was a complete surprise and the brunette was touched beyond words that sweet little Meg was taking their morning together so seriously.

“She’s never seen you go to that job before Al. It’s a totally new concept for her” Ashlyn explained later Thursday night as they got ready for bed together. “Last summer you were on maternity leave. The summer before that you were a grad student. The summer before that she probably only remembers you hanging out here with her while Whit and I had training. She had no idea you went upstairs to the office and worked for three hours after she went to bed every night that visit.”

“I never really thought about it like that before” Ali confessed as she brushed her teeth.

“She asked me why I didn’t go to work anymore” the blonde chuckled as she dried her face off. “That’s when I started thinking about it.”

“Oh poor thing is all confused. All of a sudden we’ve switched roles on her and she probably never even knew I had a job before” the brunette frowned at the thought of little Meg being worried about her wife’s job status. “Well, I’ll make sure she has fun tomorrow morning. Then you can come rescue her and take her home after lunch.”
But Meg didn’t want to go home with Ashlyn and Drew after lunch. She wanted to stay with Ali at the big office instead. Both women were stumped. What on earth could be fun for an eight-year old about sitting and drawing and coloring and reading and playing on her iPad on the couch in Ali’s office? It wasn’t until Ali was getting her briefcase and breastfeeding bag packed up for the ride home that she figured it out. She walked over to the couch to help Meg pack up her ‘briefcase’ which was really her backpack but with many of her stickers removed. They were putting her drawings away and the brunette noticed that she had been drawing a lot of stick figures with long hair and dresses. The iPad had a kids’ app open where you could be a clothing designer and drag and drop different types of clothes onto the male and female models. After some quick questions during the drive home it became clear what Meg was confused about.

“How come Ashyun doesn’t dress like a girl?” Meg asked, using the name she had always called the blonde even though she was capable of saying her name correctly.

“What’s a girl supposed to dress like?” Ali countered, wanting to be sure what Meg was thinking.

“Like you and Mommy.”

“I wear a lot of the same things Ashlyn does though, don’t you think?”

“Sometimes, but you never wear boy clothes like she does.”

“Do you mean like a suit when she gets dressed up? Like at our wedding?”

“Yeah, like Dev.”

“Well, Meg I’m not really sure you’re old enough to understand this but I’m going to tell you the truth, ok?”

“Ok.”

“There’s really no such thing as girl clothes and boy clothes” Ali answered simply and then paused to allow her words to sink in before continuing. “People should wear the clothes that they like and that they feel comfortable in. Don’t you think?”

“I guess.”

“Have you talked about this with your mom before?”

“Yeah. She said I would understand it when I was older.”

“She might be right” Ali laughed a little nervously as she drove. “Don’t feel bad if it’s confusing. It’s confusing for some grown-ups too.”

“But why does she like to wear boys...” she stopped herself and changed her word, “suits?”

“You’ll have to ask her. I’m sure she’d be glad to talk with you about it though.” Ali waited for another minute before trying again. “Don’t you think she looks nice when she gets dressed up and wears her suits?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Do you think she would look nicer if she wore a dress?”

“No” Meg laughed.
“I think she looks beautiful all the time, but I think she looks especially beautiful when she gets dressed up” Ali offered with a warm smile.

“How did it go?” Ali asked her wife later that night after she had put Meg to bed and talked with her about the topic of gender identity and clothing.

“I’m not really sure” Ashlyn said as she sat next to Ali on the couch and patted Fred’s head in her lap. “I pretty much said the same thing you did and asked her if she had any questions.”

“Did she?”

“Nope. So I told her to ask me any time she had questions and we could talk about it again. Then I just told her that everybody was different and some people liked different colors and some people liked different flavors and some people liked different clothes and left it at that.”

“Everytime she comes here I feel like we scar her a little bit” Ali chuckled. “Not that it’s bad or anything, just that she learns or sees things here with us that I’m not sure Hannah planned on” she chuckled again and kissed her wife on the cheek.

“What happened last summer?” Ashlyn asked, screwing her face up as she tried to remember. “What did I miss?”

“She was fascinated with my breastfeeding, remember? I kept thinking she was going to ask me to try it one of those times she stood there and watched” she giggled.

“Oh yeah” Ashlyn laughed and leaned her head back on the couch. “No, I told her it was just for little babies. I had the same thought you did. Yeah, she does learn new things here doesn’t she?”

“It’s good for her, obviously, but I just feel kind of bad for Hannah if she hadn’t thought about it before.”

“I’m sure she’s thought about it” Ashlyn replied as she stretched. “She always liked having Meg see different kinds of people. She was glad when a new student in her class would be anything other than Caucasian. She gets it.”

“Maybe you should take her shopping tomorrow as part of your special day?”

“I was thinking the same thing princess.”

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The first two weeks of February, before Meg’s visit, had been wonderful at the big old house. It was just Ashlyn, Ali, Drew and the dogs and they couldn’t have been happier about it. By that time, Ashlyn was kicking ass as the stay at home mom and Ali was back to her full badass boss lady at the office who didn’t blink an eye when it was time to pump. Marcy looked on in amazement sometimes as the tough as nails negotiator on the phone morphed seamlessly into a working mom who had to schedule time to pump her breastmilk for her baby son at daycare. Things had never been better for the couple and they, finally, felt like they could do this parenthood thing.

The big challenge for those two weeks had been taking Drew to the childcare facility in Lynnfield that Sydney used for Cassius. The keeper had done some more research and finally agreed that Sydney’s place was the best she could find. They enrolled Drew at the beginning of December and explained their work and life schedule to the scheduling manager at the daycare. Doreen was nice enough, but she wasn’t the one who spent most of her time with the kids. She was the one who
dealt with the parents and kept up the schedules and files and reports. She was like the accountant of your work and the principal of your school in the same person. From everything Ashlyn and Ali could tell, Doreen was excellent at her job and while not everybody liked her, they all respected her and relied on her and trusted her with their children’s lives. The other teachers at the daycare were the more hands-on people and they couldn’t have been nicer or more thoughtful or considerate. Ali and Ashlyn’s plan was to start bringing Drew to daycare a couple of times a week for a couple of hours at a time to get him used to it. Sydney thought they were being ridiculous but finally conceded that if they had the time and were able to do it that way, then it probably was a good idea. The coach knew that Cash had been absolutely fine being at daycare. The ones who had struggled at first were she and Dom.

So they started their plan in January with the intention of him going there for full days starting in mid-March when Ashlyn’s training camp for the Breakers started. The keeper would drop him off on her way to work and then pick him up on her way home. If Ali, for whatever reason, left the house later or came home earlier then she would drop him off and pick him up. An average day for Drew would be getting dropped off at daycare between 8:30 or 9:00am and then getting picked up around 4:00pm. And Sydney had been right. The ones who had a difficult time with daycare were the two new mothers. They had both cried their faces off the first time they left him there, even though it was only for two hours. They had both been fine until Drew cried as they left. That was the killer. Ashlyn started to turn around but Sydney’s words rang in Ali’s ear.

“Whatever you do, do NOT look back. It’ll crush you and set you back weeks because you will not be able to leave him if you look back and see his crying sad face.”

The brunette squeezed her compassionate wife’s arm hard and they both managed to walk out the door without turning back. But then they sat in Ali’s truck and sobbed for fifteen minutes. It was awful. But, as with almost everything else in life, it got easier the more they did it. He was only 8 months old in January so it’s not like he was calling out their names and pleading with them to stay. They were being dramatic and they knew it. But they also understood that they were allowed. He was their baby and they didn’t want to leave him at all. Ali spent most of her spare time that month trying to find a way to make a daycare space at the office, but she was the only one who needed one so it just didn’t make sense. She vowed to keep it at the top of the list of things to work on as the company grew. And realistically, Ali could make her schedule be anything she wanted it to be. Most of the agents were on the road on any given day anyway so it’s not like she had to be at her desk to monitor any of them. That’s not the kind of business it was. Everything was done remotely. They had a conference call every other week with all of the agents, Ali, Jared and Marcy. Almost all of the brunette’s responsibilities were handled on her laptop or her phone and she didn’t need to be at the office for any of it. If any of their clients wanted a video call Ali preferred to be at her desk at home on the third floor and take the video call, as long as she didn’t have baby spit-up on her shoulder or anything horrible like that. The only reason she went to the office every day was to make sure the support team was showing up on time and doing their job correctly. But that was one of the most important aspects of the whole business. If the agents out in the field couldn’t rely on the support team to get the documents and contracts prepared correctly and quickly for them then they wouldn’t be able to do their job with the clients. It was vital that the office ran smoothly and efficiently.

The other reason Ali went to the office was to keep training Marcy to become the person that Ali could rely on to do just that when she got pregnant again. The younger woman had grown a lot and improved in many ways and Ali was proud of her. When she went out on her next maternity leave Ali was going to give Marcy more responsibility and a raise to keep her working hard while she was out. As tempted as Ali was to stay home with Drew more often than not, she knew she had to put the time in at the office now, while she could, because she hoped to be taking that maternity
She desperately wanted one solid year running the ship at Knight-Harris without taking time off to go to school or have a baby. She loved going to work and she loved doing her job and she knew having Drew in daycare was good for him too. It was just so fucking hard to leave him.

Ashlyn and Ali celebrated their four-year February anniversary on Saturday, February 8th by spending the night in Boston having dinner at a fancy restaurant and then dancing the night away at a lounge that overlooked the Charles River. They were all dressed up in their finest and enjoyed stripping each beautiful article of clothing off of each other in the fancy hotel room they booked for the night. Whitney and Ryan had come up to spend the night at the big old house to watch Drew and the dogs. They were going to ask Ken and Vicki but they were busy with Koty and his rehab, which had started in January. Everybody in the family was trying to give them the time they needed to focus on that without asking them for help with anything else.

Whitney’s heart broke a little bit when she saw that her old room now had the twin bed in it that used to be in Meg’s old room. Ashlyn had warned her that she had set the room up for Meg’s visit coming later that month but the defender was still surprised how much it hurt. Stupid old house with so many of her favorite people in it. They were going to move both twin beds back into Whitney’s old room but they really liked having one in the nursery. There were some nights where Drew was sick or fussy, especially with the teething, and Ashlyn or Ali would just turn the baby monitor off in the master bedroom and go sleep in the nursery to be closer to him.

And Valentine’s Day was the following week and Ali and Ashlyn finally just fessed up to each other a few days before the big day.

“Babe, you know how much I love going out with you...”

“Well I hope so, going steady is kind of the whole point of marriage you know” the keeper teased as she folded tiny onesies on the nook table at the back of the family room. She sat on the banquette seat and quirked an eyebrow at her beautiful wife who was standing next to her, at the end of the table, folding crib sheets and other towels. “Please don’t tell me you’re breaking up with me now” she rolled her eyes playfully. “We’re just getting good at this parenting thing.”

“Hush” Ali frowned. “Don’t even joke about that.” She smacked her keeper’s ass lightly but couldn’t help the small smile that formed on her face.

“What? The breaking up or the parenting?” Ashlyn pushed her luck farther and patted the brunette’s ass, earning a glare for her troubles.

“Don’t joke about either” Ali’s eyebrow was quirked now and she cocked her head and stared at the blonde. “It’s bad luck and I don’t want to tempt fate or anything like that so...just stop.”

It was times like this that Ashlyn loved Ali more than ever. The brunette was a creature of logic, for the most part. She relied on facts and reason to make most of her decisions in life, but certainly not all of them - she was on the record as having a healthy respect for the unknown and unknowable. But by and large, logic was her primary guide. And here she was not wanting to joke about the unthinkable because she didn’t want to tempt fate or piss off some unseen God or force or spirit with their arrogance about how lucky they were to have the life they did.

“I’m sorry baby, I’ll stop” Ashlyn said sweetly and then pulled her wife a foot closer so she could wrap her arms around her stomach and hold her tight from her seat on the end of the banquette.

Ali was slightly annoyed at first, both with the tempting fate teasing and now the interruption. She just wanted to get the laundry done so they could relax for an hour before pumping again and
going to bed. She held the crib sheet in both hands still, above her keeper’s head, waiting for the blonde to release her so she could get back to work. But after a few seconds she melted and dropped the sheet onto the table. Ali moved her hands down Ashlyn’s back and relaxed into the hug, loving the way the blonde nuzzled the side of her face against her stomach, trying to keep her head low enough to avoid her breasts.

“I want to tell you something Ash, but I need to make sure you know that I love going out on dates with you and doing things with you that don’t involve the baby” she said softly, talking to the top of her wife’s blonde head and playing with the hair at the back of her neck with one hand.

“Ok. I get it. What’s up?” Ashlyn asked without moving anything but her mouth.

“I know we didn’t do anything for Valentine’s Day last year and I still feel really bad about ruining our plans” she rolled her eyes at herself as she remembered the awful day she had trying to find office space in the city and then getting stuck in traffic and then, worst of all, falling asleep on her wife’s lap when she finally did get home, making them miss their dinner reservation. “We can go out this year if you want, I owe you a do-over from last year at the very least...”

“Al, Ali, sweetheart...” Ashlyn said each word louder as she fought to get her wife’s attention. She finally squeezed her super tight with her arms and made her gasp in surprise.

“Oh!”

“Listen to me my love” she grinned and pulled her head away from her stomach so she could look up into her favorite chocolate eyes. “First of all, I don’t care if we go out for Valentine’s Day. It’s not my favorite and I kind of feel manipulated by... I don’t know exactly who when we do celebrate it.”

“Really?”

“Really. I’d much rather celebrate our February anniversary every year instead...”

“Yes! That date actually means something to us” Ali agreed with her own nose-crinkling grin. “I think that’s why Valentine’s Day never quite measures up for me, not that ours haven’t been wonderful, because they really have...”

“Good. I’m glad we got that out of the way. No more Valentine’s Day mess to deal with.”

“We can still celebrate it” Ali said in a small voice as she looked away shyly.

“Ah, gotcha” Ashlyn quickly corrected herself and pressed a kiss into her wife’s stomach and gave her a gentle squeeze. “We can still do the cards and the flowers and maybe some chocolates, but we don’t have to do the crazy crowded restaurants and all of that stuff. Right?” she looked up again for confirmation, hoping she had gotten it right that time.

“Exactly” Ali beamed down at her. “Nothing fancy. Just a card and maybe some flowers or some chocolates. But that’s it. And we’ll go out and celebrate us the week before, just like we did Saturday night” she trailed her fingers along the back of her keeper’s neck, just below the neckline of her sweatshirt, enjoying the goosebumps she felt erupt there.

“I love it” she mumbled against Ali’s stomach. “It’s the best plan ever. I’m really glad we talked that out Al. Thank you.”

She let the brunette’s waist go and leaned back against the back of the banquette seat. She turned her body a quarter turn to the left so her lap and legs were facing the end of the banquette with Ali
standing in front of her. Ashlyn pulled and spun her wife down onto her lap so Ali’s back was to Ashlyn’s front. The brunette chuckled, surprised at how strong and smooth her wife could be, and leaned back into her as the keeper wrapped her arms around her stomach again and kissed the side of her neck. Ali rested her hands on top of Ashlyn’s and turned her head to the side to give her better access with a small whimper.

“Second of all” Ashlyn pulled her lips away to finish her thought from earlier. “You don’t owe me a do-over from last year. That might have been my favorite Valentine’s Day ever, to be honest with you.”

“But we didn’t do anything, don’t you remember? I fell asleep...”

“I remember every bit of it, and my favorite part, even better than you falling asleep on my lap – I love that and you know it, was feeling our baby kick for the very first time.” She paused and kissed Ali’s neck again. “And we both felt it, together, at the same time and I still can’t believe that happened. And it’s all because we were laying there together baby.”

“I love you so much Ashlyn.”

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When they finally arrived at the Melbourne airport in Florida after dropping Meg off at the DC airport earlier that day, Ashlyn pulled the two carry-ons she was dragging behind her over to the side of the airport walkway, stopped abruptly and dropped the backpack from her back to the ground irritably.

“Jesus!” she said angrily as she turned around to look for her wife.

Ali had her oversized travelling purse, the baby’s big diaper bag and Drew and walked to a stop in front of the blonde with a concerned look on her face.

“You ok babe?”

“How do people do this?” she asked, frustration in her voice.

“I know, it’s hard honey” the brunette tried to be sympathetic but what she really wanted to know was if she could put the heavy diaper bag down or not. Were they stopping there for a few minutes or would Ashlyn’s mini-meltdown only last for a few seconds? “Do you want to stop for a few minutes or should we keep going to the luggage carousel?”

Ashlyn had never flown with the baby before and this little trip had been quite the eye-opener for her. Ali had flown all the way to freaking Portland for the championship weekend in October but she had her dad and Vicki both helping her. She, at least, knew what she was in for on this trip. They had also had the added challenge of little Miss Meg on the first leg of their flight. She was just old enough to be troublesome because she wasn’t so little that she was afraid or nervous anymore. She felt comfortable enough in airports that she wanted to explore a little bit. Thankfully, Ali had arranged for Hannah and Dev to meet them at the airport in DC instead of bringing Meg all the way back to Hannah’s apartment. That would have been too much with all of Drew’s crap too.

“I just...need a minute.”

“It’s ok Ash. I’m going to go check out the baggage claim area and see if they have a breastfeeding lounge of some kind. I’ll text you if I find one” she leaned forward and kissed her frazzled wife’s lips. “Otherwise I’ll be waiting for our luggage, whenever you’re ready.”
By the time they collected their suitcases and made their way out to the rental car, with a baby seat that fit the child they had reserved it for and actually worked, Ashlyn’s head was about to pop off of her body from stress and aggravation. She had held Drew, who was fussy and responding to the stress pouring off of her body, while Ali argued with the guy at the car rental counter about the piece of crap baby seat they were trying to get her to use. The keeper really was at the end of her rope and she wasn’t exactly sure why. Finally she stepped forward and nudged her wife’s elbow, enduring the withering look from her before speaking.

“Just take it and we’ll go by a real one at Target and bring this piece of crap right back on our way to Chris’. Ok?”

After the two-hour ordeal of driving to Target, buying a baby seat and putting it in the rental car and returning the crappy baby seat from the rental car place, both women were ready to snap. They made it to Gram’s old house, which was now Chris and Beth’s house, and took a few minutes to relax in the driveway before going inside. It was Sunday late-afternoon and the sky was full of swirling storm clouds off in the distance. It was hard to tell if they were headed in their direction or moving away from Satellite Beach. A few hours later there was relative calm in the house. Ali and Ashlyn had just put Drew down for the night at 8pm and excused themselves to go take a walk. They strolled down the dark beach as the wind picked up and pushed against them as they walked. They weren’t holding hands, but they were shoulder to shoulder and that was as close as either of them wanted to be to anything right at that moment. For the first time she could remember in a long time, Ashlyn wished there was alcohol in her brother’s house. She would have killed for a glass of whiskey right about then, just to take the edge off such a stressful day. She thought about taking her wife to a bar for a nightcap but didn’t feel like dealing with more people. She just wanted some peace and quiet. Ashlyn realized after a minute that she was walking by herself. She looked behind her and saw her beautiful brunette walking closer to the water.

It had been 78 degrees outside in Satellite Beach that day and was still pretty warm, about 75 degrees. The water, Ashlyn knew, would be close to 70 degrees as well. The wind was whipping the water up and it was rougher than she could remember in a while. The tide was coming in and the surf was crashing far more loudly than it really warranted, thanks to the wind and whatever the storm was that was heading their way. The keeper watched her wife walk into the water, right up to her knees, with no thought about keeping her skinny jeans dry. Ali stood with her arms wrapped around her chest, hands tucked up into her armpits with the bottom of her t-shirt flapping around her waist in the wind. She tilted her head up, her chin jutting out to the sea with her eyes closed. The wind grabbed at the long dark locks wrapped up in the bun on top of her head, with thin wisps whipping around her face and neck in the swirling wind. God she was beautiful. Ashlyn would remember her wife in that pose on that beach for many years to come.

Ali felt free for the first time all day with the wind engulfing her and the waves washing against her. The spray from the ocean landed all over the front of her, leaving tiny wetmarks on her t-shirt and arms and face. It felt wonderful and she considered diving in. The ocean was boisterous and noisy that evening and it matched the mood of the wind too. Ali loved everything about being on the beach at that moment, everything except the stinging of the sand as the wind made it bite at her bare skin. She didn’t know how long she had stood there. It felt like only a few minutes but the brunette would not have been surprised if someone told her it had been thirty minutes. She also wasn’t surprised when her faithful and devoted keeper came up behind her and pressed the front of her body into her back. Ali loved the way her belt buckle felt as it pushed into the top of her ass. She felt Ashlyn wrap her arms around her waist and lean her chin on her right shoulder, never saying a word. They stood like that for a long time, the incoming tide rising to their mid-thighs and making it harder to stand up straight against the force of the waves and the surf. Ali turned her head and kissed her wife’s salty cheek, happily opening her lips when Ashlyn turned her face and kissed her back. Their lips moved against each other for several more minutes, tongues slowly
sliding back and forth as their jaws opened and closed at a languid pace. There was no rush or haste in those moments. There wasn’t even any lust, other than the almost constant, low-level want that always existed between the two of them when their bodies were near each other. That kiss was about the love they felt in their own far corners, their non-erogenous zones, their middle toes and little fingers and shoulder blades. Ashlyn thought she could stay in that kiss and in that moment for the rest of her life and be happy.

She felt a hot drop of salty liquid slide onto her lip and then another. It took a minute for the blonde to understand that Ali was crying, even as she continued to move her mouth in their kiss. And that’s when it hit her. That thing that she could feel but not identify right away as they stood there together on the windy beach up to their crotches in the sea. Sadness. There was a melancholy feel that was subtle, but still there. The hot tears finally offering the proof. Things had been going so well for them the past two months, aside from the stressful travel day. What could be making her Brunette sad? Before she could decide whether to ask about it, Ali turned in her arms and hugged her tightly, putting her chin over Ashlyn’s shoulder and breaking the kiss. The keeper followed her lead and held her close, putting one hand behind her head and holding it there, gently rubbing Ali’s scalp with her fingertips.

“I love you Ali.”

It wasn’t until they got back to the house and showered the sand out of their pores that they talked about it. Drew was asleep in Johnny’s portable crib on the floor of Ashlyn’s old bedroom as the couple brushed their wet hair out and got into pajamas before climbing into bed. Ali was especially clingy and it made the keeper think of her octopus behavior sometimes after they had sex. But this was different. There had been no sex, not even in the shower downstairs although there certainly could have been. Chris and Beth had gone to bed and the first floor bathroom by the front entryway was far enough away from the bedrooms to afford them their privacy.

“Do you want to talk about it baby?” Ashlyn asked softly as she tried to hold her wife close enough to satisfy her. Ali finally just crawled on top of the blonde so every part of their bodies was touching and her head was over Ashlyn’s shoulder, forehead pressing into the pillow. “It’s ok if you don’t” the keeper kissed her neck and moved her hands slowly up and down her sides and her back and her shoulders. “But I know you’re sad Al, and it might make you feel better if you get it out.”

They were quiet for a few minutes as Ashlyn continued kissing her neck in the two or three different spots she could reach and rubbing her hands over her back. Ali turned her head towards her wife and pulled it down to tuck her forehead into Ashlyn’s neck, kissing it once as she moved. “I got my period yesterday” she said mournfully, as if it were the worst thing to happen in years. “I’m sorry sweetheart” Ashlyn squeezed her and kissed her head which was still tucked into her neck. “Are you having bad cramps or anything? Can I do anything for you?” “No” Ali sighed heavily. “It’s not about that...I just...it’s the first time I’ve had it since the baby...”

Oh shit. Ashlyn kicked herself for not picking up on this earlier. Her wife got her period yesterday and she hadn’t noticed it. Poor Ali. In Ashlyn’s defense, yesterday had been extremely busy and chaotic as she spent her special day out with Meg and then came home to help with Drew and get everything packed up for today’s travel. But still, the blonde felt terrible for not noticing and acknowledging what a big deal it was.

“Aww baby, I’m sorry. Come here.” Ashlyn pulled her Brunette’s head up so she could kiss her lips and then held it closely against her own head with her hand as she squeezed her body tight. She
held her wife like that for a few minutes before she started speaking slowly and quietly again. “I know that’s a big deal. I know it means he’ll be starting to wean himself soon. I’m so sorry honey.”

“I don’t know why it’s bothering me so much. If you had asked me two days ago if I’d be ok if he stopped breastfeeding next week I would have said yes. I mean, I’d miss it and feeling that close to him, but I’m ready. I knew it wouldn’t last forever. Hell, there are times every week that I can’t wait for him to be done, if I’m being truly honest.”

“I can’t even imagine” the keeper offered her quiet support.

“It’s a pain sometimes and it’s inconvenient and it fucking kills when he bites me. But it’s also the most amazing thing I’ve ever done. The whole idea that my body knows exactly what his body needs to grow and then produces milk with just what he needs in it, changing it month by month or week by week, blows my mind. I watch him sometimes when he’s nursing and I really feel like I’ve done what I was put on the earth to do. I know that sound dramatic, but...”

“No, it doesn’t. I think about that a lot too. It’s a real miracle what your body does to bring a baby into this world and then feed it until he learns how to fend for himself. Every part of it blows my mind and I really can’t imagine what it feels like to be a real part of that.”

“Now that I’ve got my period again and I know the breastfeeding will end soon it just makes me feel so...worthless, in a way. I know I’m not worthless to him” she tried to explain the complicated emotions she was feeling, “but I know I’ll never have that feeling again, ever. And it’s breaking my heart.”

“Oh love, I wish I could make you feel better. But all I can do is hope he takes his time so you can have that feeling as long as possible.” Ashlyn kissed her again and gave her another big squeeze. “Let’s do everything we can to make sure you get as much nursing time as you can, ok?”

“No, it’s too late, that’s what my body’s trying to tell me. He’s sleeping through the night and he gets bottles at daycare and when you have him, and that’s how it’s supposed to be. That’s ok. That’s all part of him getting bigger. I don’t want to make him go backwards now. That won’t do any good.” Ali lifted her head and looked at her wife beneath her. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do though. You’re so sweet to me.”

“I’d do anything in the world for you baby. You know that.”
The first week of vacation was spent in Satellite Beach at Chris and Beth’s house. They relaxed and took the boys to the beach and surfed and shopped and slept and enjoyed life in the sun and the ocean. They visited Tammye and Carol who had been living together since the beginning of October in Carol’s beautiful beach house in Melbourne Beach, the next town over. She may have lost all of her privacy in the divorce from her abusive husband, but Carol gained a boatload of his money. It would never be enough, but Ashlyn couldn’t help enjoying the beach house a little bit more knowing that fucking bastard probably paid for it. Little baby Lizzy was as cute as could be and everybody got along well while they were there. Tammye and Carol spent a lot of time at the house trying to help Chris and Beth with Johnny so they could take care of Lizzy who was only a month old. What ended up happening most days was Ali and Ashlyn would take Johnny with them over to the beach house for the day and then bring dinner back over with them, and sometimes Tammye and Carol too. They were all family so nobody cared about having guests and being the host or hostess. Carol probably still did a little bit, but she was so happy to have moved past her awkward Christmas panic attack that nothing seemed to bother her. She was happy none of Tammye’s family treated her any differently after learning about her history.

Mike Harris had finally managed to pull his head out of his ass about Tammye and Carol and everybody knew it had been that crazy Christmas experience that had made the man see the light. Everybody thought it was learning about Carol’s horrible past that had finally opened Mike’s eyes to the possibility that it wasn’t the end of the world for Tammye and Carol to be in love. But it had been her thoughtful Christmas gift that had done the trick. Mike had a cellphone and he used it for pretty much just that. He made and answered phone calls with it and was starting to get good at texting and replying to texts. He wasn’t great yet, he often sent a text to the wrong person without realizing it. The whole family thought it was kind of amusing so they just copied and pasted the text and sent it to the person he was trying to text, if they could figure it out. So he struggled with all of the digital media that surrounded everybody and everything those days. He knew he had some cute pictures in his phone, someplace, he was pretty sure anyway. But he could never find them. So when Carol gave him the photobook with the beautiful pictures of Mike with his two children and his two grandchildren he could not have been happier. He couldn’t think of anybody else who would have done that for him. Everybody else, including Tammye, would have given him another tutorial on how to take and look at pictures with his stupid phone. She had even thought of printing off a few wallet size photos that he could actually put in his wallet and show people whenever he wanted to. And once he softened his harsh look at the woman, he was able to go back and really see how many wonderful, kind and thoughtful things she had done for both Tammye and Gram when she was alive. Carol had come into their lives and stepped right up to help their family in any way that she could, much as Ali had done a few years earlier. Nobody dared ask him about his change of heart, but they were all extremely pleased when he joined them for dinner almost every night that week. He even rode over to the beach house with Beth, Chris and Lizzy the one night they had dinner there.

“Your dad sure seems to have come around” Ali whispered one night towards the end of the week as they snuggled in bed. “What changed his mind?”
“I thought it must have been Carol’s horrible story from Christmas” the keeper whispered back, pulling her wife’s leg up higher across her hips and gently squeezing her thigh. “But when I talked to him about it he told me it was the photo book she gave him.”

“When did you talk to him about it? I’ve been trying to get you to do that for months now” Ali whispered, frustrated.

“Yesterday morning when we went surfing. I told you we had a good talk...”

“Yes, but you didn’t tell me you talked about that?”

“What did you think we talked about?”

“I don’t know Ashlyn” Ali’s whisper was getting louder as her frustration grew. “You guys talk about a million things. I can’t believe you didn’t tell me this yesterday when I asked you how your morning with him had gone.”

“I’m sorry honey” Ashlyn realized her wife was indeed aggravated with her. “I was in a rush to get showered and changed so we could get to the beach house and I just sort of put it away until we had more time. I’m sorry.”

“When were you going to tell me? If I hadn’t asked you about your dad a minute ago we wouldn’t even be having this conversation now.”

“You’re right Al, I’m sorry. I know this has been important to you and you and my mom have been trying to get past this thing for months now and I should have told you yesterday.”

The brunette didn’t say anything for several minutes as she tried to get over her frustration. Ashlyn wondered how much trouble she had just put herself in.

“Just so you know, I would have told you probably tomorrow when we had some time and didn’t have to whisper to talk.”

Ali felt like a jerk but was aggravated because Ashlyn did this kind of thing all the time and they had fought about it before. For whatever reason, the blonde was able to just put things away in her head sometimes and then forget to share them with her wife. Ali didn’t want to know everything that everybody said to her keeper every day or anything like that. But if there was an issue that they had been talking about or working on, something exactly like Mike’s weirdness towards Carol and Tammye’s relationship, Ali expected her to share the new information with her. The brunette was able to share new information with Ashlyn in similar situations and she just couldn’t understand why her wife insisted on keeping those pertinent details to herself. After the third or fourth time it happened Ali called her on it and they had a big talk about it and that’s when she realized that Ashlyn wasn’t doing it out of disrespect or inconsideration. She wasn’t really aware she was doing it at all. The next time the topic would come up, it would remind her to tell Ali the new information that she had picked up the day before or the week before or the month before.

“It’s ok. I’m just surprised” Ali finally offered the olive branch. “Your mom and I worked so hard to get him on that plane with them in October and I’ve been trying to figure out what else I could do to help...”

“I know and I’m sorry. I think my mind is on vacation too” Ashlyn chuckled quietly and kissed Ali’s forehead, leaving her lips there for a few seconds and then kissing it again.

“I’m just extra-sensitive about this one I think” the brunette added and tilted her head up to kiss her wife’s lips. “Sorry babe.”
They spent the next several minutes talking in whispers about Ashlyn’s conversation with her father, bringing Ali up to date and officially closing the matter for the night.

“You know if we stayed at the beach house we could put Drew in his own room” Ashlyn whispered, her hand running up the back of her wife’s thigh as it rested across her hips.

“Oh do you think he’ll sleep better in his own room” Ali asked, teasingly, keeping her voice low and quiet while she moved her hand over her keeper’s chest towards one of her nipples.

“Definitely. Without a doubt” Ashlyn answered as her hand rounded the curve of her wife’s amazing ass and gave it a squeeze. She tilted her head down and nudged Ali’s head so she would lift her face and lips up. They kissed for a minute, keeping it simple for the time being. “Don’t you think so?” she asked as they broke the kiss, both sets of eyes dark with want.

But Ali didn’t answer. She caressed and rubbed and then pinched and tugged on her keeper’s breasts and nipples while grinding against the side of her hip and breathing her hot breath against the blonde’s neck. She licked and sucked the soft skin there, making Ashlyn moan and swallow hard. The keeper moved her hand around the curve of Ali’s ass to between her legs, dragging her fingertips against her crotch and feeling how wet her thin cotton pajama pants already were. She felt her own passion pooling between her legs when she heard Ali moan at her touch.

“Fuck” Ali exhaled and nipped at the blonde’s neck as she rolled on top of her, grinding their mounds together and feeling like she was going to explode. “I need you so bad...”

Both of Ashlyn’s hands were on her ass, applying hard pressure and increasing the friction of the grinding. She never thought they would have sex with their baby in the room, but she was pretty sure she wouldn’t be able to last another three days until they drove to Miami. She wanted Ali right that minute and knew she would have a hard time stopping if they went any farther.

“What about the baby?” she breathed out, terrified of the answer but needing to ask the question just in case.

“He’s asleep” Ali whispered her reply as she reached both hands up and under her keeper’s t-shirt to find her bare, stiff nipples waiting for her fingers. “And he can’t see anything anyway, the crib’s down too low.”

“Good” Ashlyn grunted and then crashed their lips together in a passionate and fiery kiss.

As soon as they broke the kiss for air, Ali lifted her hips so her wife could push her pajama pants down past her ass. She slid down Ashlyn’s body and pulled her sleep shorts off, bringing her right hand back up and burying two fingers into her hot center with another soft groan. She pressed her face into her stomach to try and muffle the groan as best she could.

The brunette pushed Ashlyn’s t-shirt up to the top of her chest and went to work on her beautiful breasts, already well on their way to being completely aroused.

“Unnnhhhh” Ashlyn moaned softly as she felt Ali start thrusting her fingers inside her pussy. She shoved Ali’s pillow over her own face with one hand, trying to be quiet. “Fuck...mmmmmm...” she moaned again and stroked the back of her wife’s head, running her fingers through her long, dark hair.

The brunette licked her way down to Ashlyn’s clit, circling it with her tongue and tapping at it, just to tease her wife for a few seconds. That was not the night for teasing and they both knew it. Ali sucked all of her keeper’s clit into her mouth and flicked it with her tongue. She knew Ashlyn was close and wondered how they had both gotten so worked up so fast.
“Mmmmmmm...” she hummed against the blonde’s aching clit, licking across it slowly and then flicking it again with her strong tongue. “God you taste good” she mumbled against the soft, sensitive flesh there.

Ashlyn groaned into the pillow as she arched her back at the incredible sensations she was feeling. “Just a little more...shit that’s good” she was tilting her hips up to meet Ali’s thrusts and holding the back of her head right on her clit.

The brunette pumped as fast as she could, curling her fingers up to hit her g-spot after five or six long strong strokes. She upped the pace of her tongue on Ashlyn’s sensitive nub and squeezed her breasts, pinching one nipple at a time between her thumb and forefinger. Ali hummed as quietly as she could into her wife’s clit and pushed her over the edge and into her orgasm. The keeper groaned and whimpered into the pillow as her body shook and convulsed as she came. Her chest heaved and her toes curled and her passion gushed all over Ali’s hand. The brunette straddled one strong thigh and dragged her needy core up and down it, loving the way Ashlyn’s knee hit her clit just right on the way down. She slowed her thrusts and, after a few minutes, pulled her fingers out and licked them clean, moaning at the delicious taste. She moved her mouth up to her wife’s breasts and started licking them as Ashlyn tried to catch her breath and recover.

“Jesus that was good baby” she gasped out softly, letting her arm drop the pillow next to her on the bed. “Fuck. I want to do so many things to you...”

“Just fuck me Ash” the brunette looked up at her from where she was sucking on her breast. “Now.”

The keeper didn’t need to be told twice. “You want my fingers?”

“Yes. Please babe...please.”

Ashlyn pulled her wife up and kissed her mouth hard before rolling them over so Ali was flat on her back. She still wore her nursing bra to sleep in under her t-shirt, mostly for the comfort and support, and she carefully rubbed both of her own breasts through the soft material as the keeper moved down her body and knelt between her already quivering legs. Ali bent both of her knees up and opened her hips wide as she let out a loud moan.

“Shhhh, Al, use the pillow” the blonde instructed as she took a few long licks of her wife’s delicious pussy. She would never ever be able to resist that. “You have to be quiet baby.”

Ali was more turned on than Ashlyn had been and that was saying something. The keeper sucked her way up from the brunette’s entrance to her clit as she pushed two long fingers inside her needy core. She started thrusting and quickly increased her speed when she felt Ali’s walls already trying to squeeze them.

“Mmmmmmm” she hummed and moaned against her sensitive clit as she lapped at it with her tongue before sucking on it hard.

“Jesus” Ali gasped out.

Ashlyn pushed the pillow against her wife’s mouth as a reminder and focused on how good she felt writhing on the bed underneath her. The keeper kept thrusting, as she moved her left hand to Ali’s clit and started rubbing it hard and fast. It only took a few minutes before the brunette’s orgasm hit and she came undone in her wife’s strong arms. Ali’s body went completely stiff for a few seconds and then began thrashing around on the bed, legs flailing and arms holding tightly to her bouncing
chest. She uttered a series of words that Ashlyn couldn’t understand because of the pillow, but it sounded like good things. The keeper moved her mouth back down between her legs and licked up all of her wife’s juices, finally crawling back up when Ali tugged on her hair to get her attention. She kissed her way up the brunette’s still twitching body, stopping for an extra lick of her wave tattoo near her left hip. She wordlessly put Ali’s pajama pants back on and pulled them up over her gorgeous ass and hips, pressing one last, lingering kiss against her mound before covering it up. She fished around and put her sleep shorts back on and then pulled the covers back up over them as they curled into each other. Their legs were intertwined and they each pushed a thigh up into the other’s simmering core as they held each other close, chest to chest and nose to nose. It was late and they were tired as they lay there together trying to steady their breathing and fall asleep. They could still smell each other on their fingers and taste one another on their tongues as they finally settled into each other for the night.

“I fucking love you so much Ashlyn” Ali confessed without opening her eyes.

“Me too baby. Me too.”

//

The second week of vacation was spent at Deb and Mike Christopher’s house in Miami. It was the first week of March and both women were feeling rested and relaxed. They made the three-hour drive Sunday morning and arrived in time for a nice family lunch with Mike’s two kids. They were hardly kids anymore though. Donnie was a senior in college and would be graduating that May and his younger sister Lori was in her sophomore year of college. Deb and Mike had been married for 13 years and Lori and Donnie had been 6 and 8 years old, respectively, at the time. They had always been good kids, not nearly perfect, but not troublemakers either. Ali always thought they got the benefit of having two great moms. Mike’s ex-wife, Lorraine, was tough on her kids. She had to be because she was a single mom and those three formed a tight unit. It had taken Deb a while to work her way into the kids’ hearts but she had done it. Who couldn’t love Deb? Once they learned that she wasn’t putting on some false front to try and win their affection, that the kind, fun-loving and wise persona she presented them was authentic, it had been an easy transition. Donnie was following his father’s footsteps into a financial career and looked like he was going to be just as successful as Mike. Lori didn’t know what she wanted to do yet. Like a lot of kids, she went to college right out of high school because that’s what was expected of her. She really didn’t know who she was or who she wanted to become yet. She was as liberal as her brother was conservative. They seemed to drive each other to polar opposite positions on almost every subject. They were both average looking young people with average builds and average brains. Perfectly acceptable human beings who would, hopefully, go on to make the world a better place and raise families to carry on that mission. Ashlyn had only met her wife’s step-siblings a few times but she always found it striking how much different they looked than Ali and Kyle. She knew they didn’t share any DNA. But it was a surprise to see children, even step-children, of Deb’s without the fantastic Krieger genes and those gorgeous smiles.

They enjoyed a nice lunch together and got caught up on all the details in their young lives. Everything was vital and important when you were 19 and 21 years old. It was exciting just to be in the same airspace as the two young adults. The group spent the afternoon together laughing about things and learning about each other. Mike was never more talkative than when his kids were around. He bragged like a proud father about Donnie’s success and his potential job prospects. He was as personable and charming as Ashlyn had ever seen him that afternoon. He spread his attention around to everyone too, doting on Deb the way Ali was used to seeing the couple. Deb had told her daughter that they had worked things out and would be fine and not to worry about them anymore. That marriage required work and attention was not news to Ali, but that something that had seemed so broken fifteen months ago could become so fully repaired was eye-opening and
curiously comforting. Just before dinner, both college students went back to school with their laundry baskets full of clean clothes and some extra cash in their pockets.

The rest of the week was almost as restful as the first week had been, but not quite. Ali had to work a little bit each day but was able to keep it fairly short and sweet. One afternoon she had a two-hour conference call with the agents and support staffers about some new licensing protocol that was going into effect later in the year and Ashlyn sat in the guest room with her, playing quietly on her phone until the boring meeting was finished. Ali closed her laptop and set it and her phone and blue-tooth earpiece on the nightstand next to the bed and stretched her tanned legs out, pointing her toes and letting a little squeal out at the same time. She wore short, athletic shorts that covered the tops of her thighs and a racer-back tank-top style nursing top. She had been fresh out of the shower before the call, arriving back home after their morning of golf at the club with Mike and one of his buddies. Deb was enjoying a Grandma day with Drew and was in her glory, taking him to her school and showing him off.

“How the hell do all of those brains” Ashlyn looked at her wife sitting next to her, propped against the headboard of the bed, and moving her eyes from her beautiful brunette head down the length of the rest of her, “get to be inside that body?” The keeper bit her bottom lip as she took in her wife’s beautiful form. “Unbelievable.”

“You’re very sweet but you’re not getting any right now babe” Ali chuckled as she leaned over for a simple kiss, resting her hand on Ashlyn’s tight stomach. She knew the look on her keeper’s face and loved it. “Mom will be back soon and I miss my baby boy. Let’s take him for a swim.”

“Oh sure, torture me with your sexy brain for two hours and then torture me some more with all of this” she pushed Ali back against the bed and hovered above her, holding her own body up for a minute and raking her eyes over her gorgeous body, “in a sexy bikini out by the pool. You are a wicked, wicked woman” she teased and lowered her body on top of the brunette’s, bringing their lips together in a slow kiss.

They heard Deb’s voice call out a greeting from downstairs and Ashlyn groaned, dropping her head onto her wife’s shoulder.

“I told you” Ali giggled and kissed the blonde’s head. “Come on, let’s go.”

They had been having more sex than usual during their vacation and they were both very happy about it. Aside from Ali’s still tender breasts and her stretchmarks, her body was back to what it had been pre-baby. It had taken a lot of patience in the beginning and then a lot of hard work once her body had healed, but she felt as good as she had in years. It had taken months but Ashlyn had finally convinced her that the stretchmarks were like her warpaint and she had earned them by claiming victory in one of the most important battles she would ever face in their lives. That’s what Ali loved about the blonde. She didn’t try to tell her that she couldn’t see the stretchmarks. She didn’t try to soothe her and remind her that they would fade over time and get lighter and lighter until they would be hard to see. She acknowledged the change in her body and helped her learn to accept it and even love it. The combination of Ali’s increased body confidence and the complete rest and relaxation they had been getting while in Florida had brought them together and made them more intimate. It was the most wonderful development and it had taken them both by surprise. They knew they would have sex at some point during their two-week vacation. They were usually able to hold-off while they stayed at Chris’ house because it was so small and there was so little privacy. But once Ali’s period finished early the first week they had also had three days to relax and sleep and it was as if someone somewhere flipped a switch to ‘ON’. They shared longer, hungrier looks as they got dressed or switched places in the shower, taking turns watching Drew while the other got ready for the day. The short but hot sex they had that night in Ashlyn’s old
room was the beginning of a passionate run of exchanges and touches and orgasms that both surprised and titillated them.

There was a hot tub off the back deck at Carol’s beach house that you could choose to be hot or cool. In Florida you usually chose cool and enjoyed the bubbles coming out of the powerful jets without the extra heat. They had sex there in broad daylight one afternoon as Johnny napped and Carol and Tammye took Drew for a walk down the beach. It had been fast and urgent and unusually public for the couple. Their bathing suits stayed on and they prayed the bubbles and sound of the jets gave them enough cover so any spying neighbors wouldn’t know what they were doing. And now that they were at Deb’s house Drew was set up in Lori’s room, right next door, so they had all the privacy they wanted in the guest room. Every touch between them was electric that vacation and it reminded them both of the very first year they got together. They had jokingly called it their honeymoon stage because they just could not get enough of each other, no matter how much sex they had. After four years together that same feeling was back and it made them both giddy with excitement.

“You two seem good” Deb commented later that afternoon as she made the salad for dinner, chopping vegetables at the kitchen counter while Ali sat at the kitchen table nursing Drew. The knowing smile and quirk of her eyebrow made her daughter blush and look down at her baby, finding some excuse to adjust his shirt. “Vacation time is so important Alex. I’m glad you guys have figured that out. Don’t ever forget it.”

“I can’t remember the last time I was this relaxed” she admitted, relieved her mother had thrown her a bone and focused on the vacation part of why they were so good. “Not even last year on the honeymoon...”

“Well you were pregnant then!” Deb laughed. “Pregnancy is a lot of wonderful things, but relaxing it ain’t.”

“Yeah, I never thought about it like that before, but that’s so true” Ali agreed with a grin. “I think a lot of it is Ash being home this off-season and especially the last couple of months. It’s been really good.”

“I can see that. I’ve never seen you two look happier.” Deb caught the hint of excitement in her daughter’s eyes as the brunette lowered her head again to look at the baby. “What’s going on? I know that look” she began, turning her body away from the counter to face the kitchen table. “That’s the look you get when you’re trying to keep a secret from me...”

“You may as well tell her, poker face” Ashlyn teased her wife from the kitchen door. “It’s a good thing you were a good kid because you would not have been able to get anything past her” she leaned down and kissed Ali on the cheek as she nodded her head at a grinning Deb. “The grille’s ready. Let me know when you want to put the steaks on” she said to her mother-in-law with a smile.

“Tell me what? Tell me what?” Deb walked to the table and sat in the chair across from Ali as Ashlyn stood up and smiled again.

“Are you sure?” Ali looked up at the blonde and reached for her hand, intertwining their fingers.

“Yeah, I mean, I don’t see either one of us changing our minds, do you?”

“No I don’t” Ali beamed.

“We can tell my family this weekend on our way home” Ashlyn finished, answering the question
her wife hadn’t even asked yet.

“You two are killing me right now. Killing me!” Deb’s voice was quiet so she didn’t disturb Drew while he was nursing, but urgent and excited.

“We’re going to have another baby next year, hopefully” Ali announced with a bright smile. “We want them to be close in age like we were with our brothers.”

“Oh Alex! Oh my God you guys, this is the best news” Deb got up and hugged them both, kissing each of them on the cheek and then hugging them again. “Who’s going to carry this time?” she looked from one woman to the other as she sat back down. “Ashlyn are you going to take the plunge?”

“I’m carrying again” Ali replied as Ashlyn looked down, disappointment or sadness flashing across her face for a quick minute. “Ash has a few more years in her soccer career...”

“I know it’s selfish and I feel really bad about it” the blonde admitted for the first time ever, even to her wife. She kept her eyes down as Deb saw the look of surprise on Ali’s face.

“Ashlyn” Deb said quietly and took hold of her other hand, the one Ali wasn’t already holding. “Your professional soccer career is something really special and rare and fleeting. I don’t know what you girls have talked about or discussed, but I know that when you and I talked about this in Portland you told me you were really thinking about having a baby. If that’s still true...”

“It is” Ashlyn interrupted. “I think about it a lot and the more I think about it the more I want to do it.”

“Well, then your time will come honey. After your career is done you’ll have time and you can carry your next baby. Don’t you worry about it again” Deb stood up and wrapped her daughter-in-law in a strong hug as Ali picked up Drew to burp him.

It wasn’t until later that night, after they had sex and were a mass of tangled, naked limbs, that Ali asked her wife about the guilt she was carrying. The brunette was laying in her favorite spot, her head resting on Ashlyn’s thigh, facing up her sexy body and the rest of Ali’s body curled under the blonde’s long leg that was bent at the knee. Ali ran her left hand across her wife’s mound and scratched lightly at her short hairs as Ashlyn recovered from her orgasm. Ashlyn’s right hand caressed the brunette’s thigh and squeezed it every once in a while.

“Why didn’t you tell me you felt bad about not being the one to carry the baby?” Ali’s voice was soft and even. It wasn’t accusatory, only questioning.

“Oh I don’t know” Ashlyn sighed and stroked her wife’s brunette head with her left hand, smiling down at her as she propped her head up higher with another pillow. “It just feels like my thing, in my own head that I have to deal with.”

“You know that I want to get pregnant again, right? It’s not like I feel like I’m doing this huge chore or something. You know that, right?”

Ashlyn didn’t answer her for a few minutes, which was all the answer the brunette needed.

“Ash, I want to have another baby with you. If you wanted to carry it this time I would let you, of course, but I’m more than happy to do it again. If I didn’t want to I wouldn’t do it. If I didn’t want to I would never have brought it up...”

“But I’m the one who brought it up” Ashlyn corrected her with a sad smile. “That’s the difference.
And I feel selfish and shitty about wanting another baby, close in age to Drew, and then saying ‘yeah but by the way I won’t carry it until I’m good and ready’.” She paused and closed her eyes for a few seconds. “It’s just a shitty thing to do. And I’m afraid that you’ll say yes and talk yourself into being excited about it even, just because you’re the nicest, sweetest, kindest woman in the whole world and you’d do anything for me” Ashlyn’s voice broke at the end and she closed her eyes again and turned her face to the side as her tears started to fall.

“Hey now” Ali soothed, pressed a soft kiss to her wife’s inner thigh and then got up and straddled her hips. She pulled Ashlyn up and hugged her tightly as the blonde’s tears continued to fall. “I’m not that nice. I’m really not” she chuckled as she rubbed circles into her wife’s back.

“But you are” Ashlyn whined. “You would absolutely get pregnant again just because I wanted us to have another baby. I know you would, even if you didn’t really want to.”

“What makes you so sure about that?” Ali pulled back to look at her upset love. “I’m pretty good about telling you what I need and want.” She wiped Ashlyn’s tears off of her face and studied her favorite hazel eyes, darker brown than usual that night. “Why do you think I would do this if I didn’t really, honestly want to?”

“Because I would do the exact same thing for you.”

The keeper answered it as plainly and simply as any question in her entire life. She knew without the tiniest bit of doubt that Ali would go through another pregnancy just because she, Ashlyn, wanted another baby. She knew it because if she switched their positions, she would gladly sacrifice two years of her life to give Ali that gift. And by the time you added the nine months of pregnancy to the year or more of breastfeeding and taking care of a newborn, it was about two years of your life where your primary concern at every moment of every day was the baby and nothing else. Just because women got pregnant and gave birth every day didn’t make it any less of a big deal and a huge commitment. Ashlyn knew Ali would do that for her because she would happily do it for her brunette. Ali was quiet for a long time as they held each other. She knew her keeper was right and she couldn’t try and convince her otherwise.

“Ok, so you’re right. I would do it for you, just like you would do it for me. I can’t even argue that because you’re right” she began as she leaned back so she could see Ashlyn’s face in the dim light. “But I’m telling you without any tiny amount of hesitation or doubt in my mind or heart or soul or body that I want to have another baby and be pregnant. Just because I would do it if I didn’t really want to doesn’t mean I don’t really want to. Do you understand that?”

“Are you sure honey? I mean, are you really sure?” The blonde’s face was serious and stern.

“Ashlyn” Ali exhaled and kissed her wife’s lips softly. “I promise you. I’m really sure.”

They hugged again and both felt relieved that this topic had been officially dealt with. They didn’t need any lingering guilt or festering resentment in their lives. No thank you. Ashlyn felt good about Ali’s next pregnancy for the first time since they had started discussing it at the end of last year. They continued moving their soft hands over their smooth bodies as they comforted and held each other. Ali loved the way their bare breasts felt together, God did she miss that. It was another sign of the impending end of her breastfeeding that her breasts weren’t quite as sensitive as they had been. She was happy about it because it meant she could have sex more often without the nursing bra and Ashlyn could touch them a little bit too. Ali felt a twinge in her core as the blonde’s nipples hardened at the contact with her own. Their touches and strokes and caresses intensified as they moved together, the brunette still straddling Ashlyn’s lap.

“I love you Alexandra” the keeper said clearly, between their ragged breaths and hot gasps and
pants as their excitement rose and rose.

Ali opened her eyes and focused them on her wife’s, locking them together for a few seconds as their bodies continued to move, seemingly without their participation for those few seconds. It was as if a conduit had opened and all of the pure, selfless, devotional, raw, inspirational and powerful love that they shared passed between them in that brief span of time. It overwhelmed them and they both stopped moving entirely, doing nothing but staring at each other and breathing heavily. Ali’s words finally left her lips but they came from that shared space between their hearts and souls that they had just had a glimpse of. There was really only one thing to say in that moment.

“I know.”
Ok friends....the last 10 chapters are going up today. I hope you like them.

The first half of 2020 progressed as quickly as their life always seemed to, at breakneck pace. Ashlyn and Ali and Drew returned to the big old house from their two-week Florida vacation and settled back into what would become their new routine for the foreseeable future. Aside from the weekend before Breakers’ training camp started when Ali and Drew accompanied the blonde to New York City for the big press conference announcing their committee’s findings on the NWSL referee issue, their routine remained the same.

It was nice but cramped when they stayed with Kyle and Nathan and Luna in their new apartment that weekend. Both men seemed genuinely pleased with their new commitment level and it had already been seven weeks so if it wasn’t going to work they would have figured it out by then. It was nice to see Kyle so comfortable with Nathan, or Nate as he had gone back to calling him. When they were younger, both he and Ali called him Nate. Kyle heard back from NYU and had been accepted as a film student and was excited to start in September. He shared the good news in his weekly video on YouTube and his social media exploded with congratulations from all of his friends as well as the thousands of strangers who followed him because of his honesty, humor, candor and kindness. He was also gorgeous and that never hurt his cause either. Nate started his new job as the head pharmacist at one of the busiest big name pharmacies in the city and had been doing well. It had been hard at first to get to know the new company he was working for. Nobody wants to help the new boss out too much. But once he got past that he was pretty happy with the way things had turned out. His old company basically lost a bidding war with his new company for his services so he got a raise and a promotion and some additional vacation time in the deal.

Drew and his moms adapted to daycare. The ten and then eleven-month old got lots more teeth, learned to drink from a sippy cup and even said ‘mama’ for the first time in March. He could mimic what you did and stand up on his own. He could clap and wave and play peekaboo like a champ. It was incredible to watch the new things he did every single day. Ali and Ashlyn had used the word ‘mama’ interchangeably to refer to both of them since Drew was born. They didn’t want to assign different names to each other because it just seemed silly. Ideally, they wanted Drew to call them what he wanted to call them and differentiate between them the way that he saw fit. But that was a more long-term plan, obviously. In the short term they were both ecstatic when he said ‘mama’ to both of them during dinnertime one evening. Ali had been feeding him his finger foods on his tray, tiny bits of chicken and black beans was on the menu that evening, and he had been happily squawking away as he usually did. He looked from one mom to the other and grinned or giggled and made a bunch of cute sounds as he chewed his food with his mouth and had two handfuls ready to go in next. Ashlyn had made a joke about how much he liked black beans and chicken and wondered if they had gotten the wrong baby at the hospital and Ali had laughed her short, loud shout of a laugh as she took the food out of one of his hands so he couldn’t stuff his mouth full with both hands. In the couple of seconds after Ali laughed and before either of them could say anything else they heard him, clear as a bell.

“Mama” he said and grinned. “Mama” he repeated, in case they hadn’t heard him the first time.
“Did he just...”
“Holy shit...”

The Breakers started their preseason and, for the first time since they had been in the NWSL, they stayed in Boston for all of it. The training facilities were so good now that they didn’t need to travel to Jacksonville, FL to get out of the cold and snow to train in March. Ashlyn had mixed feelings about it. She would always love going to Florida. Until the day she died, she knew some part of her blood would always quicken when she was back where she had been born and raised. But she was happier to not have to leave Ali and Drew for those ten days. It was a microcosm of her life choices really. Sacrifice the warmth and familiarity of Florida to live in New England with the woman she loved and raise her family. The Breakers had returned a strong team that season and they only had one goal. Anything less than winning the championship on their home pitch would be considered a failure. The challenge of that season was playing through the season with the 2020 Summer Olympics taking place for three weeks in August. The FIFA window covered the actual Olympics so the whole league had the first three weeks in August off. What was going to be troublesome was playing the games in July when most of the International players were called up to their National teams to prepare for the Games in Tokyo. The Breakers would be without Rose Lavelle, Megan Oyster, Morgan Andrews and Abby Smith during those games. Rose was the USWNT starting midfielder, and Megan was fighting for a starting spot on the backline. Abby Smith had narrowly won the back-up keeper spot on the Olympic team but wasn’t expected to see any playing time. And Morgan Andrews made the Olympic team as an alternate which meant she would travel and train with the USWNT but not actually suit up and play in the games. Missing those players was going to be tough and it was going to have a great deal to do with how the NWSL season shaped up.

The other news that altered the course of the season for the Breakers was Whitney’s announcement that it would be her last. Nobody took the news well. She was still so young everybody said when she told the team early on in training camp. She would be 33 years old at the end of this 2020 season and it was time to go back to school and get her law degree and get on with the next chapter in her life. She told them she was staying local and she would not hesitate to come to the training facility and kick ass whenever she thought it was necessary. The last thing she did was tell them that she wasn’t treating this season any differently than she had any other. She was expecting their full commitment and she assured them that they had hers.

“We’re going to work our asses off starting right now in training camp and we’re going to win the fucking championship this year. No excuses. Am I clear?”

Baby news kept coming that Spring too. Molly gave birth to little baby Evan Cross on April 20th, which happened to be Marathon Monday in Boston. Luckily both she and Niki had the day off so there was no rushing around trying to get to the hospital from different locations. The delivery went smoothly and both mother and son were doing well when Ashlyn and Ali went to visit that evening after volunteering again out in Hopkinton for the Marathon.

The biggest baby news came one afternoon at the very end of March. When Sydney wasn’t coaching after school she would pick Cassius up from daycare at around 3:30. Ali started trying to make that a thing they did together a couple of times a week once she and Ashlyn started settling into a routine that Spring. She would leave the office at 3:00pm and pick Drew and Cash up and go
to Sydney’s house in Stoneham for an hour or so before heading up to the big old house. Or, if Sydney got to daycare first, she would pick the boys up and be waiting for her bestie at home. Both friends knew it wouldn’t always work, but even if they could make it work once a week it would be wonderful. When Ali parked in front of her old house, which still made her smile every time, she could hear one or both of the boys squealing in delight from inside. It was a cold, raw March afternoon and as she and Sydney sat in the living room chatting and watching their sons play, Ali knew something was up.

“Ok, I’m tired of being patient boo, what is going on with you?” she asked with a serious look that made the coach blush.

“Damn girl, why you have to know me so well?” Sydney teased and then laughed before saying with a big smile, “I’m pregnant.”

“What?!” Ali’s jaw dropped to the floor and her eyes bugged out. “Are you kidding me?”

The last time they had talked about it Sydney was pretty hesitant about having another baby and, as far as Ali knew, nothing had changed.

“Nope. No joke. I’m not even a month along yet but it’s confirmed. I went and had the bloodwork done yesterday” she made an excited face and smiled at the brunette.

Ali gave her a big hug and congratulated her and kissed her cheek as she sat back, still holding both of her hands.

“This is good news right?” she asked, cautiously. “I mean, you sure seem happy...”

“Yes, definitely yes” Sydney confirmed with a huge grin. “We decided to just try and see what happened. Sort of leave it up to fate if we were supposed to be parents again or not” she explained. “Dom has always said he wanted two or three kids and that’s never changed. But he told me it was totally up to me how we made that happen. He would be open to adopting if I didn’t feel like I could go through another pregnancy.”

“God I love your husband” Ali smiled and squeezed Sydney’s hands. “Such a good guy.”

“The best” the coach agreed. “I can’t even pretend it’s not true. He’s just the best.”

“So you’re doing it” Ali breathed out after a minute, giving her best friend an adoring look. “I’m so happy for you and proud of you Sydney Rae. What a badass you are!”

“I wouldn’t be doing it without you Alibaba” she said quietly as she got serious for a minute. “As much as my first pregnancy terrified you, yours strengthened me. I want to try and do some of the things you did so maybe I don’t have to have the episiotomy this time. I’d like to use Dr. Comello this time too. Do you think that would be ok?”

“Ok with who?”

“With you, silly.”

“I’ve been telling you to go to her for YEARS Syd. Of course it’s ok with me” Ali chuckled and smacked her friend’s thigh. “I don’t know if she’s accepting new patients or not though...let me talk to her...”

“You tell her whatever you need to tell her to get me in. Tell her I want the Krieger special delivery.”
“Alright, alright” the brunette laughed. “I’ll call her on my way home, I promise.”

They were quiet for a few minutes, Ali helping Cash with the puzzle board he was working on and Sydney watching the interaction.

“I’d be an idiot not to want to try again” she said as she looked at her beautiful son. “Look at him. He’s perfect.”

“You’re absolutely right, and I’m not just saying that because he’s my godson” Ali agreed with a grin. “Ash and I always said if our baby was half as adorable and awesome as Cassius we’d be doing alright.”

“And when I get nervous I just tell myself it can’t get much worse than last time and I feel better” Sydney chuckled.

“Knock on wood” Ali said as she rapped her knuckles on one of the wooden puzzle board pieces next to her leg and smiled back at her bestie.

The brunette was not a very superstitious person but that was something she had done all her life. Her Grandma on her father’s side taught both she and Kyle to do that and he still did it too. Whenever somebody said something that would be either really good or really bad if it happened, you were supposed to literally knock on something wooden and say “knock on wood” in order to avoid tempting fate. If it was something really good then you were knocking to improve the odds that it really might happen. If it was something really bad then you were knocking to decrease the chance. If there was nothing wooden around you could knock on your own head as a substitute. Some people, like Ali’s grandma, had taken it very seriously and if you couldn’t find something wooden to knock on within a minute or two it was a really bad omen. There was no knocking on your head as a lame substitute for those folks.

“I’ll take all the good luck I can get” Sydney replied with her own smile. “I feel really good about this though Al. I know it sounds kind of dumb, but when Dom suggested we just try and see what happens it felt so right. Like, if it was meant to be it would happen.”

“Doesn’t sound dumb to me at all” Ali said confidently. “The thing that kept running through my mind the whole time I was in the delivery room, among a million swear words, was something both my mom and Dr. Comello said. Our bodies were made to do this. We just need to have a little bit of faith when it gets scary and trust mother nature and trust ourselves.”

“Amen sister” Sydney grinned. “I can do that.”

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When Easter rolled around in mid-April Ken and Vicki Krieger felt like they were ready to host a family get-together again. It had been a rough three months for them as they helped Koty move back home and take the Spring semester off from BC. They also supported him as he went through an intensive outpatient rehab program up on the North Shore. Mattie, Ali and Ashlyn’s therapist, had given them the names of a few good programs that she recommended. She also encouraged them to get Koty started with his own therapist who could help him after his rehab work was completed. Her help and advice had been invaluable and Koty said he wanted to see her as his therapist. She told him he could always come talk to her but that a therapist who specialized in addiction and recovery would probably be better for him.

The outpatient rehab program was demanding and time-consuming and kept Koty busy almost every day during the four months he participated. At Easter he had just two weeks left in the
program and was excited to complete it and get on with his life. Everybody in his immediate family had been called in to participate in some of the counseling sessions. Ken, Vicki and Tanner attended several sessions and Kyle came up for a couple too. Koty had made his peace with his step-brother early in the process and had leaned on him for support, addict to addict. Kyle was more than happy to be there for him but balked when Koty asked him to be his official sponsor. Kyle made it clear that Koty could always call him for anything, anytime, but that his sponsor should be somebody local that he could get to if he needed to. Even Vicki’s ex-husband Vince flew out from California to be there for a couple of sessions one week in March. That hadn’t been as helpful as anyone hoped it would be. Both Tanner and Koty had troublesome issues with their father who basically abandoned them when they were 11 and 13 years old respectively. That was work to be done for both young men, if they wanted to do it, in the future. Vince accepted as much blame as anybody wanted to assign him. He knew he had been a terrible father to his boys. He just wasn’t equipped to deal with much of the fallout from his decisions. Before he went back to California he set up an account for Vicki to use to pay for the rehab and anything else Koty or Tanner might need to help them deal with his shortcomings as their dad.

Ashlyn had talked at length with her brother after the Christmas debacle with Koty and Kyle. She wanted to help the kid so badly but she knew there was very little she could do. She picked her brother’s brain about what had helped him finally get and stay sober, knowing it was different for every single addict on the planet. He told her what had made a difference for him was when Gram took in a foster care puppy for six months while he was staying with her after his final rehab stint. He explained that, for him, having the responsibility of taking care of that puppy gave him a purpose and some very easy, tangible, achievable goals every single day. He would never know if that puppy had made the difference or it was just coincidental timing and that particular rehab was the one where he was truly ready to be sober again. He liked to think the puppy had everything to do with his success. Ali was leery of the idea of burdening her dad and Vicki with something else to take care of if Koty wasn’t ready to be responsible yet. Kyle cautioned them too saying it could be too much pressure to put on Koty so soon. Finally, Ashlyn went to see Vicki and Ken one evening while Koty was at rehab and told them about her idea.

That Easter Sunday the blonde showed up at Ken’s house with a ten-week old puppy from Sweet Paws, the rescue group on the North Shore where they had gotten Persey and Fred three years earlier. ‘Bandit’ was a mixture of some sort of Hound and Great Pyrenees and he was adorable. He had all the markings of a Great Pyrenees - he was all white, with some grey and black brindle on his right ear and his eyes were both thickly rimmed in black. ‘Bandit’ got his name because the area around both of his eyes was all black, instead of just the rim. He looked like he had a bandit mask on, except not across the bridge of his nose which was all white like the other 98% of him. The tip of his nose was black, the pads of his feet and his belly were pink, his ears were floppy and his tail long and straight. He would grow to be about 110 pounds with a thick wavy coat and a full, flagged tail. The Great Pyrenees were bred as guard dogs for livestock and they were built to be outdoors and liked cold weather and snow. They could be lazy and a little stubborn so he probably wouldn’t be doing any agility training. But they were patient and kind and protective with smaller animals and kids. They were designed to protect and guard so if you were to wander onto Ken’s property that dog would bark his head off at you and approach you with his hackles up to ward you away. But once he identified you as part of his pack he would protect you with his life if necessary. With the hound mix in this one it was tough to predict what he would look like when he was full-grown, but the common guess was that he would look like a large golden retriever, except white, with the broad head of a Newfoundland.

It had been almost a year since Apollo had passed away and the family was ready for another dog. Ashlyn watched Ken’s face carefully as she sat down on the kitchen floor with the puppy in front of her. Everybody wanted to see the new arrival and came closer to get a look, but Ken knelt down
without saying a word and the puppy ambled right over to him and nuzzled him. The keeper knew that if Koty wouldn’t take care of the dog that Ken certainly would. They kept the name Bandit too, everybody agreed it was perfect for the cute puppy with the black eye mask.

Back in January, Ali had told Koty that she would be willing to help him when he was ready to decide what to do next about finishing school. But the earliest that would happen would be the Fall, if Koty was ready. She also offered to help Tanner with her experience playing Division 1 college soccer, whenever he came home. They had gotten together twice so far that Spring to talk about her playing days and what the transition had been like for her and things like that. He was using the planner she had given him for Christmas too, which she took as a very good sign. They made plans to work together that summer, if as soon as Tanner was finished with school. They would take Ken’s help when he was around to give it, but otherwise, Ali would run him through the drills that had made her so successful. The brunette knew she was biting off a lot by working with her step-brother. It meant she had to keep working with Mattie to get past her unresolved issues with soccer in general. She had started working with the therapist last July to sort of ease herself into it. Ali met with Mattie once a month, usually in the late afternoon so it didn’t ruin her entire day, and they went back to her Penn State days and relived all of her highest highs both on and off the pitch for the Nittany Lions. Once they had finished with that, it took a while because she and the team had been really really good, they went back to the day she broke her leg and worked on the lowest of the lows. There wasn’t a timeline or a deadline. But, in typical Ali fashion, the brunette wanted to gut her way through it and just get it over with once and for all. Ideally, she wanted it to be finished by the time she, hopefully, got pregnant later that year.

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Mother’s Day was Sunday May 10th and the Breakers had just defeated Houston the afternoon before. They celebrated Mother’s Day by having any player who was a mom bring their child out onto the pitch with them for the walkout. Ashlyn and one of their bench players, who had just joined the team that season after bouncing around the league, were the only two moms. The keeper felt guilty because she hadn’t actually given birth and thought she should make some sort of disclaimer about it. Both Whitney and Ali told her she was being ridiculous. The blonde walked out carrying her 11-1/2 month old son on her hip and the crowd went crazy. She coaxed him into waving with her as her name was announced during introductions and the pictures spread all over social media. She was praised for being a good mother and having him wear earmuffs to protect his little ears. And she was criticized and called a bad mother for exploiting her baby for her own benefit. All Ashlyn cared about was that Drew had fun while he was out there with the team. He gave Whitney a high-five and laughed as if he was trying to reassure his mama that he was doing just fine. Standing there with her son turned out to be one of the keeper’s proudest moments that year. She shared a tearful smile with her wife when she handed him over before she took the pitch.

“Great job mama” Ali kissed her cheek and flashed that nose-crinkling grin at her. “Now go kick some ass!”

Ashlyn started and played well, throwing her body around blocking shots and making saves right and left. She was stiff and sore when she woke up later than usual on Sunday morning. Since she had gone back to work and the season had started, Ali typically got up first and fed Drew his breakfast as she waited patiently for her coffee to kick in. It was still hard for Ali to untangle herself from her keeper and get out of their warm bed and she sort of hoped it always would be. But there was an almost one year old boy who needed to be fed and loved on too. After they ate breakfast, the brunette would bring him upstairs, carefully carrying a cup of coffee for her wife, and put him in bed with Ashlyn while she got ready for work. The blonde loved waking up to her boy’s giggles and love pats. It was her second-favorite way to wake up. Ashlyn would sit in bed, carefully drinking her coffee, and play with Drew and talk to Ali as she moved around the room.
getting showered and dressed.

That Mother’s Day Ashlyn woke up to an empty bed and missed her beautiful brunette and their dark-haired boy. She sat up and groaned as her muscles and bones barked at her for over-using them the day before. Ali had given her a strong massage before bed and that had helped tremendously, but the keeper was feeling old, broken-down and a little blue that morning. She dragged herself to the bathroom and took a long, hot shower to try and ease some of the kinks out of her back and shoulders. When she walked over to make the bed she noticed a card on her nightstand that she must have missed when she first woke up. Her lips formed a smile, almost involuntarily, when she saw Ali’s loopy script on the envelope. She had drawn a big heart next to Ashlyn’s name too. The Mother’s Day card was sweet and thoughtful and had a verse about discovering strengths you didn’t know you had and learning to deal with fears you never knew existed before you became a mom. The keeper bit her bottom lip to stop it from quivering as she read the words and smiled. Ali had added:

‘You’re such a great mom! Drew is a lucky boy and I am a lucky wife. I appreciate the mom you are every day Ashlyn, even if I don’t always take the time to tell you. There’s no-one else I would ever take this ride with. Only you. Sweet, wonderful, strong, kind, amazing you...I love you.’

They had talked about how they wanted to celebrate Mother’s Day and both agreed they wanted to relax at home with Drew. Ashlyn had brought home a beautiful bouquet of flowers Saturday after the game to mark their first Mother’s Day as moms. She had a white, diner-style coffee mug that said ‘Wife Mom Boss’ on it in a nice Black script, wrapped up in a gift bag with a gift card for a day of spa treatments at the fancy spa in the Beauport Hotel. Ashlyn carried the gift bag and card down the backstairs as she searched out her adorable little family. She didn’t have to look far. They were sprawled out on the floor of the family room, enjoying the mid-morning sun that was streaming through the windows by the nook and the side door. Ali was laying on her back with her head propped up on a pillow reading a board book about farm animals to her son. Drew sat next to her, his little bum right up next to her armpit with her arm loosely around him, and resting on the floor. He had some wooden blocks in front of him that had letters, numbers, animals and colors on their different sides and he was stacking them up and putting them in his mouth and looking at them as his mother read to him about cows and chickens and pigs. Persey was up on the couch, looking down and watching over the scene, while Fred was curled up near Ali’s feet, peacefully accepting the occasional block that came his way.

“Where’s the piggy?” Ali asked playfully as she finished reading a page.

Drew looked at the book standing on her stomach and giggled and sputtered and pointed vaguely towards the book, his other hand holding a block to his mouth.

“That’s right. Where is the piggy on your blocks? Can you find the piggy?” she challenged him with a big smile as she watched him look down at the blocks in his lap and on the floor. He grabbed the first one he could find and showed it to her. “No, that’s a horsey. That’s not a piggy you big silly.” She giggled and he giggled with her. He blasted three or four blocks around with both hands in his excitement and laughed louder.

Ashlyn took in the sight and beamed. Her heart was so full in that moment that any sadness she had woken up with was blasted away, just as those blocks had been. Ali was still in her pajamas, pink and white striped pants and a loose white t-shirt over one of her nursing bras. She was barefoot and she had her hair down and messy with her glasses on her pretty face. Drew was still in his pajamas too. A thin cotton one-piece sleeper with yellow and orange dinosaurs all over it. His bare feet and hands stuck out of the cotton arms and legs as they all moved around and through the blocks. His dark brown eyes smiled at the book and his mama and the blocks. The keeper thought she was
going to cry as her emotions soared.

After they had all spent the next hour or so together with the blocks and farm animals and dogs in the family room, Drew went down for a nap. Ali came downstairs, showered and dressed, carrying a large gift under her arm. They exchanged their presents as they sat on the couch in the family room, eagerly watching the other’s face for their reaction.

“Oh Ash, I love it, you’re so thoughtful and sweet to me” she leaned over and hugged her wife.
“Thank you so much honey.”

They shared a slow kiss, surprising each other with how emotional they both were, and leaned their foreheads together for a minute.

“Wow, who knew coffee mugs were your thing?” the blonde teased with a chuckle.

“Yeah, it’s the coffee mug” Ali rolled her eyes and leaned back with a sly grin. “You’ve finally figured me out babe.”

Ashlyn took her time opening her gift and unwrapped a beautifully framed series of photographs. It was a large 36 x 24” frame with twelve different photographs in it, each one in its’ own frame inside the bigger frame. Every picture was of Ashlyn and Drew starting from the very first picture Kyle had taken of the two of them the evening he had been born. They were randomly placed, not in any sort of chronological order, and they were all of Ali’s favorite photographs of her wife with their baby. Drew was secondary in the pictures for probably the first time ever. These pictures were about the keeper and Ali had been careful to choose the photos accordingly.

“I hope you like it” she began shyly. “There are so many pictures and sketches of me hanging around here that I figured it was way past time to have some more of you on these walls too.” Her voice was soft, but clear and she never took her eyes off of her beautiful wife as she spoke. “You’re a wonderful mother Ash and I love you more than I could ever say.”

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They celebrated Drew’s first birthday with a small party at the Breakers’ stadium in the early afternoon before their game against Washington on May 30th. On the 27th, his actual birthday, Ali and Ashlyn made a point to spend some time reflecting on that day and how scary and exciting it had been for both of them.

“Can you believe he’s a year old already?” Ashlyn asked softly as they watched him sleeping in his crib that night.

“No” Ali shook her head and bit her lip, trying not to cry. “He’s so big now...he’ll be walking soon and speaking in real sentences before we know it...I can’t believe any of it.”

“Remember his gnome hair?” the keeper grinned brightly and her dimple appeared. “God I miss that.”

“One of my favorite things about last summer was watching you show people his gnome hair” Ali chuckled and hugged her wife tighter as they stood arm in arm next to the crib. “You were so proud of that. It was so cute the way you would take off whatever hat he had on and fluff it up just right...” she sighed wistfully.

“I keep thinking that my heart is so full that it can’t possibly hold anymore” Ashlyn admitted as she felt Ali put her head on her shoulder and nuzzle into her neck. “And then I wake up and love him even more the next day.”
Drew was too little to have his own friends so the party was basically for Ali, Ashlyn and their friends and family, most of whom were going to be at the Breakers game. It was a little unorthodox but it worked for everybody. They set up an area in one of the dining rooms, which was pretty much a nice cafeteria, and gathered around and sang happy birthday to him and then watched him demolish his birthday cake. Ashlyn had ordered him a shark themed birthday cake, of course, and it came with a separate, small cake that was all Drew’s. Nobody wanted a slice of cake after he had buried both hands as well as his face into it. So the nice cake they kept for the guests and the soccer players enjoyed their cake and ice cream after the match as a reward for starting the season with a 5-1-1 record and sitting at the top of the table. Ali hadn’t forgotten about making the birthday cake shaped like the number one. She had made, and ruined, three different cakes that week trying to do it. Thankfully, Deb gave her a step by step tutorial the day after the party before she flew home in the afternoon. She jokingly warned her daughter that the ‘2’ was one of the hardest ones to do so she’d better start practicing now.

Drew had no idea what was going on but he had fun. He giggled and laughed and smiled as everyone took pictures of him on his big day. Deb, Tammye and Carol had all flown up for the weekend just to celebrate with the little man. Kyle and Nathan made the trip and, of course, Ken and Vicki came to the city for the party and then stayed for the game afterwards too. The whole Breakers team was there as were the rest of Ali and Ashlyn’s friends. Even Niki and Molly came with Noah and one month old Evan in tow. Jared, Marcy and Jen came from Knight-Harris and a lot of people were surprised to learn that Jared and Nathan were brothers.

Ali had been to a ton of first birthday parties and she always enjoyed them. She used to think it was silly of the parents to apologize for having the party even though the baby really had no concept of what was happening. She just used to think those parents were being dramatic about having a party that really wasn’t for their one year old. It wasn’t that big of a deal, in Ali’s opinion, so just get over it and enjoy the little party. Well, that was before Ali was the mom throwing the silly party for the clueless baby. Now that it was her turn to be the hostess she understood what those other parents had felt a little ridiculous about. The brunette must have rolled her eyes and apologized to six different people as she welcomed their guests to the party.

“Honey, you’re doing it” Ashlyn whispered as she walked up behind her wife and put a gift bag on the table with Drew’s birthday presents.

Ali had just greeted Carm and Jessie and apologized to them for making them come to a one-year old’s birthday party.

“Doing what?” Ali whispered back as she turned to face the blonde.

“You’re being one of those parents who’s embarrassed about having a birthday party for their baby” the keeper’s voice was quiet as she took both of Ali’s hands in hers and squeezed them.

“Oh my God, I totally am” Ali groaned and dropped her chin to her chest.

“It’s ok” Ashlyn tilted her chin up and pecked her lips. “Just stop doing it and you’ll be fine. Look, everybody’s having fun.”

Ali turned to face the room and felt her wife’s arms wrap around her waist from behind as they both gazed out at all of their friends and family who were indeed having a good time. Drew wasn’t walking yet, but his favorite thing was to hold onto your hands and have you walk him around. It was adorable, but it was a total back killer after a while. The boy was in his glory because there were forty people there who were more than happy to walk with him for as long as he wanted. And what he wanted was to follow Cash around wherever his little legs were carrying him. At the moment, Rose Lavelle was trying to convince Midge Purce to let her have a turn with the birthday
boy and there was a line of other Breakers players waiting for their turn too.

“See?” the keeper kissed Ali’s neck and grinned. “Just stop apologizing. You hate when other parents do that to you, right?”

“You’re right, you’re right” the brunette agreed with a sigh and a smile. “They wouldn’t be here if they didn’t want to be here.”

The party was actually a lot of fun for everybody, except maybe Molly who looked like she would rather have stayed home. Ashlyn took her to a small office that the team staff used for random meetings and told her to just relax as long as she wanted to. The new mom’s face glowed with relief and she hugged the keeper in thanks. The amount of gifts Drew received was obscene. They were all adorable but they hadn’t thrown the party to rake in gifts. Next year they would have to make sure the invitations said no gifts. Until he was old enough to care, he didn’t need everybody getting him something for his birthday. One gift stood out and got the whole group’s attention.

Ashlyn’s teammates, except for Whitney, gave Drew a new jersey to wear for the rest of the season. They had checked with Ali to make sure they were getting the right size and everything. The brunette assumed it was going to be another keeper’s jersey so he could rep his mama on game days. When Ashlyn pulled the jersey out of the gift bag and held it up, it was a field player’s short-sleeved jersey in beautiful Breakers blue. The keeper’s face frowned in confusion for a second before smiling politely and starting to thank her teammates without understanding what was really going on. Ali was confused too, but she saw Whitney’s face on the other side of the room register shock and surprise.

“Ash” the brunette called softly from behind her. “Turn it around” she mouthed and moved her hand in a circle to show the keeper what she meant.

“Aw, you guys...” Ashlyn managed to get out before her words got caught in her throat.

She looked for her best friend’s face and quickly found it with an emotional smile on it. Ashlyn bit her lip and nodded at the team captain as both women tried not to cry. Almost everybody except the team was really confused by the jersey that appeared to be for the wrong player. The keeper finally found her voice, cleared her throat and turned the jersey around a few times so everyone could see it.

“This, ah, this jersey is pretty special and it’ll be an honor for my son to wear this beauty for the rest of the season.” She had to pause to fight her emotions again. “For those of you who don’t know, our fearless leader, our captain and my best friend, Whitney Engen, is retiring after this season... and this is her jersey. And...um...this is a really sweet gift you guys” she looked at the rest of her teammates proudly. “Thank you very much.”

Everybody applauded and then laughed as Ashlyn struggled to get Drew to cooperate with the jersey change.

“Let’s wait til after he destroys his cake” Ali suggested with a smile, letting her frustrated and emotional wife off the hook. “Then we’ll put this new one on. How ‘bout that big boy?” she picked up Drew, put him on her hip and squeezed her wife with her free arm. “You ok babe?” she asked her keeper quietly as she kissed her shoulder.

“Yeah, that was just a real surprise. I love it though. Best idea ever” she breathed out, trying to steady herself.

“I’ll make sure he’s wearing it for the game, don’t worry” the brunette replied with another squeeze.
And she did. The camera operator for the jumbotron always found Ali’s suite at some point during the game and put a shot up of whomever was holding Drew. The crowd loved it and responded loudly every single time. The brunette was ready for it this time. She told her family that they had to turn him around so the camera could see the back of the jersey if they were the lucky one holding him when he hit the big screen. The announcement came during halftime when they list off the birthday boys and girls who had birthday parties at the stadium that afternoon. At the end of the short list of older boys and girls the stadium announcer’s voice boomed:

“And very special happy birthday wishes to our own Breakers’ family member Drew who celebrated his first birthday with us today. Happy Birthday Drew!”

The cameraman found the cute little boy in his grandmother’s arms and Deb turned him around so Whitney’s name and number could be seen on the back of his jersey. The Breakers hadn’t made an official retirement announcement, nor had Whitney, so some of the fans who picked up on the jersey were more than a little confused. The fans that had watched Ashlyn’s Road Trip with the defender understood exactly why the jersey was significant and they spread the word. Whitney and management had decided not to announce it until later in the season, if at all. The shy defender didn’t want anybody to make a big fuss out of anything. Both Ashlyn and Ali had told her she should announce it so her fans would know and get the chance to see her one last time as she made the rounds that season. Ali was secretly pleased about her jersey being on Drew and up on the jumbotron that afternoon. Maybe it would force the defender’s hand.

The celebration later that night after the Breakers win was wilder than usual. The team had the next week off, in accordance with the FIFA dates, and the ladies were ready to let loose. Ali sent Drew home with Deb, Tammye and Carol who were all staying at the big old house for the weekend and she and her friends went out to party with the team. They hadn’t done that in a long time and it felt wonderful. Everybody was disappointed when Sydney said she needed to take Cash home instead of joining the party. Only her best friend, husband and mom knew the real reason. She was only two months along so they weren’t telling anybody until she was through her first trimester. Missing the post-game party was a sacrifice Sydney was more than happy to make in order to keep her secret and her baby safe. Ali marveled at how far she and her best friend had come as both grown-ups and as mothers. Both roles were challenging and frustrating but they were doing it. And they were doing it together, just as they had always hoped and dreamed.
Sydney gets some bad news and this is where I have trouble knowing what to warn about...I don't think this chapter needs an official warning. But please let me know.

Having the first week of June off was fun for Ashlyn. Her mom and Carol were staying through the week for their vacation and they spent lots of time with Drew at the beach. Whitney came up almost every day too, just to relax and enjoy the gorgeous weather as well as the easy company. One afternoon Tammye and Carol took Drew back to the house for a nap and left the two best friends sprawled out in the sun at the beach. School was still in session so the beach would stay mostly empty for another couple of hours until kids got home from school for the day. The sun was hot and there was a light breeze that was keeping most of the bugs away. It was one of the most perfect beach days Ashlyn could remember. She and Whitney were laying on two lounging beach chairs that were tilted all the way back so they were flat. Ashlyn was on her back with her eyes closed and the defender was on her front with her face turned towards her bestie, eyes closed too.

“So how’s married life treating you?” the keeper asked without moving.

“Amazing. I feel like it’s a dream and I keep waiting to wake up or something, like it can’t really be this good” Whitney chuckled.

“That’s awesome Whit. That’s the best feeling, well once you really believe that it’s not just a dream. That’s the best feeling.”

“I mean, I know part of it is just finally being together. I can’t believe how great it feels to wake up next to him every day. It’s just...”

“I know, right?” Ashlyn blocked the sun with her hand and turned her head to face the defender, her voice excited as she spoke. “Like, how fucking simple a thing is that? But man, it’s everything.”

“I’m so happy” she grinned back at the keeper.

They were quiet for several minutes, each appreciating their spouse and their marriage and their life.

“So, have you reconsidered your premature retirement?” Ashlyn teased with a sly smile.

“Ha ha, very funny.”

“I’m sorry, I really will stop doing that. Soon.” Ashlyn asked her best friend that question at least once a week. “Have you made your final decision yet?”

“Yeah, Harvard Law. You can’t beat it. I was starting to look other places just to not go to Harvard Law and I caught myself. Everything’s all set for me to start in January.”

“That’s great Whit. I did that with UNC when I got in. I had applied to and been accepted at a few
other, smaller schools..."

"Your back-ups."

"Yeah, right. And when I got into UNC I started, like, freaking out because it was too good to be true. I almost chose one of my back-ups, just because it wasn’t UNC and I couldn’t mess it up."

“You know Harris” Whitney opened her eyes and looked at the side of her friend’s head. “You’re a fucking genius sometimes. I mean it. I’ve been trying to explain that feeling to Ryan for three weeks now and he doesn’t get it. Thank you for understanding.”

“I’ve got you girl. Always” Ashlyn said with a wink. “And don’t you ever forget it.”

Friday that week found Ali, Ashlyn, Drew, Tammye and Carol leaving the big old house for the weekend and Whitney and Ryan staying to watch the dogs and enjoy the beach while they were away. Chris and Beth had scheduled baby Lizzy’s christening for that Sunday, knowing that Ashlyn would have it off and be able to attend. Lizzy was just over four months old and she fit perfectly into the christening gown Gram had made for Johnny. It was a little early to tell, but so far she was a perfect replica of Beth. Johnny, with his dimple, dark hair and brown eyes, was a mini-version of Chris. It looked like they were going to be one of those families where the little girl looked just like the mom and the little boy looked just like the dad. Adorable. The ceremony went off without a hitch and sweet little Lizzy slept through the whole thing. She didn’t even move a muscle when the water was poured onto her head. Beth’s troublesome sister Ann proudly held the baby as she stood next to one of Chris’ best friends as the godparents. Ann had continued to make improvements in her life. She was still far from perfect but, over time and with some help from the therapist she had been working with, she had learned that Beth was not her enemy. The two sisters had gotten closer but nobody really truly trusted Ann yet. Not even Beth, not if she was being honest. She lived her busy and happy life expecting the other shoe to drop eventually. She had made a promise to Chris though, right after Johnny was born. She swore that if Ann ever did or said anything that came back on one of their kids she would cut her out of her life forever. But Ann had been good with Johnny, even with the sting of not being his godmother.

The gathering after the christening was at Beth’s parents’ house this time and it was new for all of the Harris clan. Chris and Johnny had been there, of course, several times but none of the Harrises had ever been invited there before. Ali went out of her way, again, to talk with Ann and keep working on forging some sort of friendship with the prickly woman. But the other relationship that had been the strongest had been between Tammye and Beth’s mom. That was before Tammye’s own change in relationship status threw a roadblock up there. In one of her first real tests of being out and proud with Carol, Tammye bravely introduced her girlfriend to Beth’s very religious and conservative parents that day. Nobody expected it to go well but Tammye found the courage to do it anyway. Ashlyn was close-by just in case her mother needed some extra support. But in the awkward silence after the introduction it was Johnny, six weeks shy of his third birthday, who broke the tension. He ran up and hugged Tammye around her legs, asking to be picked up.

“Gigi, Gigi. I want up” he said breathlessly, his face pink and a little sweaty.

Carol handed Tammye her glass of ginger ale, bent down and picked the toddler up. She knew that Tammye’s hands were really bothering her that day and that it would be hard for her to lift him up so she did it instead. She propped the boy on her hip closest to her girlfriend and grinned when he said her name and nuzzled into her neck.

“Caro” he cooed.
Ashlyn watched the exchange and loved the way Beth’s parents stood there not knowing what to do. Their grandson was showing them exactly what the correct behavior was but they were too stuck-up and stubborn to follow suit. They excused themselves and moved away to greet other guests. Carol looked at Tammye and shrugged. Tammye leaned up and kissed her cheek, then kissed the back of Johnny’s head and smiled.

Ali, Ashlyn and Drew stayed at the beach house with Tammye and Carol that weekend. It was the first time Ashlyn had visited Satellite Beach and not slept in her childhood bedroom. But Gram’s old house was full now that Ashlyn’s old room had been turned into Lizzy’s bedroom. The beach house had plenty of room and Carol couldn’t have made them feel more welcome. There were three bedrooms on the lower level that didn’t get used unless they had company. The first floor with the main entrance was where they spent most of their time. It was a wide open floor plan which maximized the breathtaking ocean views to the East. Their master bedroom and bathroom suite was on one end of the first floor and the big, beautiful kitchen that Carol loved to cook in was on the other end, near the garage. Between the two ends was one huge open area that had been broken into three smaller, cozier, living areas by the furniture layout and accessories. There was a big deck that ran almost the full length of the East side of the house, with the hot/cool tub at the far end in front of the master suite.

That night, as Ashlyn washed all of Drew’s bottles and sippy cups and Ali’s breast pump parts and pieces so she could get them all packed up for the flight early the next morning, she was surprised by Carol joining her at the kitchen sink.

“I’m sorry if I’m in the way here...” she began, smiling shyly.

“Don’t be silly” Carol smiled back and picked up a clean dishtowel so she could dry. “I’m just here to help.”

The two women worked side by side and chatted about the christening and the party afterwards and how happy they were that they didn’t have to spend very much time with Beth’s family. When Ashlyn was finished rinsing off the last tiny spoon she shut the water off and turned sideways to face her mother’s girlfriend.

“I’m sure you don’t need to hear this but I’m going to say it anyway” she started a little awkwardly, looking down at her wet hands and rubbing them on her shorts to dry them off. “Thank you for being so good to my mom, for loving her the way you do.”

Carol looked surprised and stopped drying the sippy cup in her hand as she met Ashlyn’s eyes.

“Ali’s brother said that to me once and it meant a lot. Not that it changed how I felt about her at all or anything...it just, was nice to hear that someone she loved and trusted so much understood how very much I loved her.”

Carol swallowed hard, hesitated for a second and then hugged the blonde, sippy cup and towel still in each hand. Ashlyn returned the hug, glad she had finally told her what she really felt. After another few seconds Carol pulled back and sniffled.

“I shouldn’t need to hear that, you’re right. But apparently I really did” she chuckled as she put the sippy cup down and picked up the last tiny spoon to dry. “I’m not sure why it was so important to me to have your blessing. Maybe it’s just because it’s been so hard to get.” Ashlyn looked at her sheepishly and blushed a little. “But that’s ok Ash. I’m glad you’re looking out for your mom. Truly, I am. I’d expect nothing less from you.”

“Not that she needs it...”
“Although she can take care of herself...”

They both spoke at the same time and then chuckled. They looked at each other for a long minute, appreciating one another and enjoying the peace and acceptance they had found together, finally.

“I’m sorry if I was a jerk, I didn’t mean to be.”

“And you weren’t. You didn’t fawn all over me or welcome me with open arms and that’s ok. You weren’t ready to do that.”

“There was always something that felt off, at least it used to” Ashlyn clarified quickly. “I think now I understand what I was sensing...”

“You could tell I wasn’t telling you the whole truth, my whole truth” Carol offered with a nod. “You have a gift for reaching people and meeting them where they’re at Ashlyn. Not many people can do that.”

“What do you mean?”

“You can find some sort of common ground with almost anybody. You take a person where they’re at and you meet them there instead of trying to bring them over to where you are or where you think they should be. Your Gram, god rest her soul, was the same way. In my opinion, although I didn’t know her nearly...”

“You’re right about Gram” the keeper agreed with a small smile. “I didn’t think I did that too though.”

“I’m telling you, you do” Carol chuckled and helped the blonde put all of the clean, dry things on the counter by the refrigerator so they would be ready to be filled and/or packed. “Why do you think everybody talks about what great chemistry you have with everybody you ever work with? I hear it all the time after you’ve done one of your appearances. They commented on it every time you did one of those opposing player interview shows last season. I’m not making it up.”

“Alright, I believe you” she chuckled and shook her head with a smile. “But this is supposed to be me thanking you for being awesome to my mom. Remember?”

They both laughed and hugged again, grinning as Tammye entered the kitchen with the mostly empty diaper bag that needed to be packed.

“Well if this isn’t a sight for sore eyes” Tammye smiled at her two favorite women in the world. “I probably don’t want to know what’s going on here do I?” she teased and rolled her eyes.

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The remainder of the month of June was spent with four Breakers games, three of which were on the road. The team kept playing well, winning three and earning a draw on the road in Chicago. In case anybody still doubted Ashlyn’s freakish performance against them, Chicago had never earned a point against Ashlyn since she had been with the Breakers. That record remained intact. Abby Smith started that June game that ended in the draw.

And after fourteen full months of breastfeeding, Ali’s special bond with her baby boy came to an end as June came to a close. He had been less and less interested, which is completely natural, so they had started weaning him from the bottle over time. Instead of breastmilk he was drinking whole milk in a cup, like the big boy he was becoming. Initially he didn’t like the milk because it didn’t taste the same as Ali’s breastmilk. So they had to mix it and slowly increase the ratio of milk
to breastmilk until he would drink the straight milk. First challenge completed. Then they had to get him to give up the bottle. They had already weaned him off of it so that the only time he still had one was before he went to sleep at night, as part of his bedtime routine. They were putting only water in his bottle before bed and so far he was still taking it but drinking less and less. It was just a matter of time before he wouldn’t want it at all.

It was a momentous shift for them all but they knew it was coming and did their best to prepare for it. It was hardest on Ali for obvious reasons. It was an emotional time for her and Dr. Comello made sure to explain everything that could or might happen to both she and Ashlyn when they went to see her for advice on weaning and stopping breastfeeding. Because Drew had naturally started weaning it had been easier for both mother and child. It wasn’t an abrupt, cold-turkey cessation which can be almost traumatic for everybody involved. Dr. Comello warned them to expect mood swings as Ali’s hormones changed again as her breasts reverted back to regular non-milk producing breasts. She told the brunette to be nice to herself and to allow herself to feel sad. If she tried to push it away or pretend it wasn’t happening it would only make things worse. And it would take anywhere from a week to a couple of months for her milk to dry up. Sometimes this could be painful as the milk was still being produced but not used and causing the breasts to become and stay full. Ali had to squeeze or express the milk out of her breasts a few times a day, gradually decreasing the frequency until production stopped completely. And, finally, her breasts would go back down to their normal size in a couple of months as well.

“You’d better take a picture now before they’re gone for good” Ali joked half-heartedly as she got dressed in Dr. Comello’s examination room after her appointment was over. “Sorry you’ll have to say goodbye to these babies.”

“Say goodbye?” Ashlyn smiled and met her wife’s eyes. “Are you kidding me? I can’t wait to say hello!”

“What are you talking about?” Ali couldn’t help chuckling at her keeper’s excitement even though she didn’t understand it.

“I’ll finally be able to touch them again without hurting you. You have no idea how excited I am about that” she leaned forward and gave Ali’s lips a sweet kiss. “It was totally unfair of you to have these” she pointed at her large breasts, “and not allow me to touch them. Just for the record. Un. Fair.”

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The last Sunday of the month, June 28th, Sydney and Ali took their sons and dogs to Ken and Vicki’s house for the day. They played in the pool, played with Bandit the puppy who was now five months old and crazy cute, and enjoyed a lazy Sunday together. The Breakers were on their way home from their away game in Seattle the afternoon before and Ali hoped Ashlyn would feel like coming up and joining them when she got home. Abby had gotten the start so the blonde wouldn’t be suffering from any wear and tear from the game. There was a good chance she would go up to Ipswich to see her wife and son and dogs.

Just before lunchtime Ali and Sydney were standing waist-deep in the shallow end of the in-ground pool pushing their sons back and forth in their baby floats. Cash’s float was a frog and Drew’s was, of course, a shark. Both boys were having fun and so was Ali, but Sydney had been bothered by cramps and back pain for most of the morning. She got out of the pool and lay on the comfy chaise lounge chair in the shade of the umbrella. Ali played with the boys for almost another hour as the coach took a quick nap.

“Hey lazy bones” the brunette finally called to her bestie. “Come help me get these little fish out of
Sydney stretched and moaned a little as she swung her feet over the side of the lounge chair.

“You feeling any better?” Ali asked as she lifted Cash out of his float and onto the cement around the pool.

“I guess, I don’t know” Sydney replied with a frown as she wrapped a towel around her son and began drying him off. “Maybe that enchilada last night was too spicy after all.”

Ali walked up the steps of the pool carrying Drew on her hip and walked past the chaise lounge chair where Sydney had been resting. There was a large blood stain on the towel there and the brunette stopped dead in her tracks as panic flooded her senses.

“Sydney Rae” she choked out. “We need to get you to the hospital.”

Sydney had been spotting for a few days and cramping a little bit that weekend. Her painful cramps Sunday morning were the worst she had felt and the dark red blood that stained the towel was the first time she had bled that much or that heavy and dark. It was common for most pregnant women to spot during the early days of their pregnancies. It was usually just a light pink spot once a day or so and nothing to be worried about. But the cramping combined with the lower back pain and the heavier spotting should have made Sydney take notice.

Ali helped her best friend into her truck and drove as fast as she could to the hospital where they had both given birth. Dr. Comello would meet them there and do some tests to see exactly what was going on. The brunette called Sydney’s mom to come over and help Vicki with the boys and the dogs as she drove. Sydney called Dom who was working a long shift in the city. He didn’t pick up so she left him a message telling him, in a surprisingly calm voice, that she was on her way to the hospital but not to worry. She told him to call her when he could.

Two hours later Ali clutched Sydney’s hand in the procedure room as Dr. Comello performed the D&C the coach had opted for. Both women had tears streaming down their faces as they locked eyes, the brunette with her back to the doctor and the stirrups and the stainless-steel instruments. Ali tried to be strong for her heartbroken best friend as Dr. Comello completed the Dilation & Curettage, cleaning out her uterus and eliminating any remnants of the failed pregnancy. The pelvic exam, ultrasound and bloodwork had all indicated that Sydney had lost the baby. The fetus had stopped growing sometime after Sydney’s 8-week appointment and there was no way to determine exactly when. Sydney and Dom were scheduled for their 12-week appointment in four days and were looking forward to hearing the baby’s heartbeat for the first time.

They wanted to observe the patient for a couple of hours just to be sure there had been no complications from the D&C. Dom ran into the hospital room and wrapped his wife in a hug, burying his face in her neck and talking softly to her through his tears. Ali freed her hand, placing Sydney’s on her husband’s strong back, and left the room to give them some privacy. She sat in the small lounge just down the hall and watched Dr. Comello go into the room to explain everything to Dom, just as she had done to Sydney and Ali when they had first come in. There was nothing the coach could have or should have done differently. It was nobody’s fault that the pregnancy failed. The kind doctor explained that 1 in 6 pregnancies ended in miscarriage. And just over 80% of miscarriages happened within the first trimester or 90 days. There was hardly ever a reason they could point to as a definitive explanation for why. The most common explanation, thought to be between 50 and 70% of all first trimester miscarriages, was that it was a random event caused by chromosomal abnormalities in the fertilized egg that wouldn’t allow it to develop normally. There was nothing wrong with Sydney and there was no reason to believe she couldn’t get pregnant again in as soon as a few months time if they wanted to try again.
“Sydney Rae I love you so much” Ali told her as she helped her buckle her seatbelt in Dom’s car an hour later. “I’m here for you, for anything you need, anytime, day or night. I mean it.” She hugged her best friend.

“I know” Sydney smiled weakly at her, leaning her head back against the headrest. “I promise I’ll call you later. I’m just tired and want to go to sleep now.”

The brunette had already told Dom to let her help as much as she could, whether it was with Sydney or Cash or Boss or anything. She would be there in a heartbeat. He hugged her again, thanked her for taking such good care of his wife and then climbed into the car and drove off.

It was almost 7pm by the time Ali made it home that night. She was tired and hungry and sad and frightened and angry as she walked into the mudroom. The dogs greeted her and she hugged them both for a long minute, enjoying the love and warmth they so freely gave her every time she stepped foot inside the house. She knew Ashlyn would be upstairs finishing up Drew’s bath and getting ready to read to him and put him to bed. A wave of exhaustion swept over her and she felt dizzy from all of the intense emotions of the day. She went to the fridge and heated up some leftover pasta and inhaled it with a glass of wine for her frayed nerves. Her heart ached as she walked up the back stairs and heard Ashlyn’s voice coming from the nursery as she got closer. She leaned against the door frame and watched her wife sitting in the glider with their son on her lap, reading his favorite board book for probably the third time in a row. She chuckled before she could stop herself and they both looked up at her.

“There’s mama” Ashlyn cooed softly, trying not to get the boy excited so close to bedtime.

“Hi sweet boy” Ali said quietly as she put her hand on his stomach and kissed the top of his head. “Are you reading a good book?”

Drew clapped his hands and squirmed as he grinned at her and then yawned, tugging on one of his ears with his tiny little hand.

“Here, why don’t you put him down” Ashlyn offered as she stood up and moved him to his wife’s arms. “Perfect timing.”

She smiled and kissed Drew’s cheek as she squeezed Ali’s arm at the same time.

“Good night baby boy, sweet dreams. I love you.”

When the brunette came into their bedroom a few minutes later Ashlyn was sitting in the glider waiting for her.

“Are you ok?” she stood up to hug her wife. “I’m so sorry honey. God, it’s so sad.”

They hugged for a few minutes and Ali was surprisingly stoic about it. Maybe she was all cried out. She felt sick to her stomach and all she could smell was whatever the hell Dr. Comello had used as a final cleansing rinse for Sydney’s uterus. She didn’t think she would ever be able to forget that smell.

“I need to take a shower, ok?” Ali asked tentatively as she pulled back from the hug.

“Do you want me to run you a bath?”

“No, thanks though” she flashed a quick, tired half-smile at her sweet wife. “I just need a quick shower to get the hospital off me.”
It wasn’t until hours later, in the middle of the night, when Ali broke down. She woke up with a start and sat up in bed, surprised to find she was in her own bedroom. She must have been having a dream about everything she had seen and heard and learned that day because she was breathing heavily and sweating a little bit. She rubbed her face with both hands and felt her emotions building up. Before she could get out of bed and go into the bathroom to avoid waking her keeper up, she felt the bed move and then a warm hand touch her lower back.

“Are you ok?” Ashlyn’s voice was sleepy and a little hoarse as she rubbed her eyes with her other hand and looked at her wife.

“Yeah, I just...I...” but she couldn’t say anymore.

She took a gasping breath and then burst into tears, dropping her hands to her lap and letting her head hang down as she cried. Ashlyn scooted closer to her wife and pulled her almost-limp body into her own and held her as she poured out her sadness and grief. The keeper held her for a long time, until her breathing had finally steadied and her sobs stopped.

“I’m here baby, and I’m sorry. And I love you.” Ashlyn’s words were slow and deliberate as she rubbed and caressed Ali’s tense body.

Ali told the blonde everything, having only told her the basics after her shower and before collapsing into bed. She told her how terrifying it had been when she saw all the blood and described all of the other details she could remember from the ride to the hospital and the procedure itself, right down to that God-awful smell of the cleansing rinse that had washed away any last tiny bit of Sydney’s no longer living baby. The brunette admitted how afraid she was that the same horrible fate could befall her later that year when she, hopefully, became pregnant. She confessed to how useless she felt because there was nothing she could do to help her best friend through the anguish she must be going through. And she balled her hands up into fists as she talked about how angry she was that the fucking universe kept fucking with Sydney and her awful pregnancies.

“It’s just fucking cruel, that’s what it is. Fuck off and just let her have her goddamned baby for once” her voice rose in anger as more tears threatened to fall.

But they didn’t. Ali just slumped against her wife now that all of that was out of her. She felt exhausted again and empty. She was so sad for Sydney. After another couple of minutes Ashlyn felt even more of the brunette’s body weight pressing against her and lay down on her back pulling her despondent wife down into her side. With what must have been the last bit of energy she had left, Ali wrapped her arm around her keeper’s stomach and draped her leg across her hips, pulling herself closer to her side and snuggling in tight. Ali was asleep in a few seconds but it took Ashlyn a while longer as she processed everything her brunette had just shared with her.

1 in 6 pregnancies ended in miscarriages. FUCK.

Dom, Sandi and Ali did their best to take care of Sydney for the next few days as her body recovered. They, and Ashlyn, were the only people who knew about the pregnancy. The coach was off for the summer so she didn’t have any place important to be. She wallowed in her grief for three days and then decided to start living again. She was sad and bored and frustrated but she had Cassius to focus on and that meant everything to her. As she talked about her feelings with her best friend at the end of that week she sounded older and wiser than her years.

“How can I be sad when I’ve got this handsome guy to cheer me up?” she said as she tickled his sides and made him giggle. “I’ll tell you what though” she admitted quietly as Cash played with one of his toys. “I’m so glad we didn’t get to hear the heartbeat. That would have made it so much harder I think. But we’ll never know I guess.” She looked at Ali and squinted a little bit, studying
her. “And I don’t want you getting all weird about trying to get pregnant this Summer. Do you hear me?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I expect you to get yourself pregnant and not worry about what happened to me. 1 in 6 remember? We’ve had our 1 now so we’re done. We’re good now. Dom and I are going to try again too. Not too soon, but we’re definitely trying again. No weirdness. No excuses for either of us. I want my Godbaby. Got it?”

“Yeah, got it” Ali replied with a warm smile. How could she not stay positive when faced with that kind of optimism from her brave best friend? “Love you Syd.”
The 4th of July was the next Saturday and the Horribles parade in Gloucester was the very next day, July 5th. It was unusual to have both events sharing the same weekend, but every once in a great while it happened. Luckily for Ashlyn, the Breakers had a home game on the 4th of July that year. Unfortunately, they lost to the NC Courage and it was their very first home loss on that pitch. In the season and a half that the new stadium had been open, the Breakers had won every game they had played there except for four. There had been three draws, all of them last season and against NC, Portland and Orlando, and now one loss. And Ashlyn had started so she couldn’t take any solace in blaming Abby Smith for that ‘L’. Although Abby had started in the NC and Portland draws last season, and Ashlyn had started in the Orlando draw. Not that the ultra-competitive blonde kept track of those things.

The Knight-Harris Company offices were in a terrific location if you wanted to watch the big 4th of July fireworks display over the Charles River. The only problem was that it was only a four-story building so the view of the river was severely impacted by the taller buildings between it and the river. If you went up to the roof and looked practically straight up you had a great view of the colorful show. Jared had hosted a small party last year with a bunch of his friends and it had gone ok. It wasn’t great, but it was better than a lot of other places in the city on the 4th. Jared was hosting another small party this year and everybody who had been at the game in the Knight-Harris suite moved over to the offices to check out the fireworks from the roof. Niki and Molly bailed before the fireworks started, but Evan was so little and it had already been such a big day for the adorable family that it was just going to get ugly if they stayed out much longer. Ali, Ashlyn, Drew, Sydney, Cash, Whitney and Ryan stuck it out and had a great time watching the fireworks from the comfort of their own building. Several of the Breakers and Courage players joined them as well as a lot of the K-H agents and staff. It took Ashlyn a long time to get over the loss that afternoon. She had never been good about losing and the Breakers had lost so infrequently over the past few years that she didn’t get a lot of practice at it. She sulked for a while and then Ali brought Drew to her and asked her to hold him for a while, knowing she couldn’t resist the magic of the 4th of July and her son. It worked. The smile returned to her face and she held the over-tired toddler and tried to keep him calm until the fireworks show started at 10:30pm.

Both Drew and Cash fell asleep and then slept right through the impressive display. Ali and Ashlyn lay there on their backs, hands clasped, and watched the sky light up above them. For a little over a half hour, everything else disappeared and it was just the two of them again, as it always seemed to be whenever there were fireworks going off. Ali remembered how amazing it had felt that very first 4th of July five years ago when Ashlyn had surprised her by showing up at her friend Rob’s rooftop party. The brunette had told the story a dozen different times, but it never diluted the powerful feelings she still had about that night – the night she fell in love with Ashlyn Harris.

“What is it with us and fireworks anyway” Ali asked her wife as they drove home just before midnight. “Both of our favorite holidays involve fireworks. That can’t just be a coincidence, right?” she lifted the blonde’s hand up and brought it to her lips for a soft kiss.
“You know us, baby” Ashlyn smirked as she glanced over at her beautiful brunette from the driver’s seat. “Go big or go home.” They both laughed and squeezed their hands together. “We’ve got all the sparkle. All the glimmer. All the magic…”

“All the cheese…” Ali interrupted with a grin and an eye-roll.

“Hey, it’s not my fault you can’t handle it woman” the keeper continued, loving the way her wife looked at her and loved her even when she was being ridiculously smarmy and over the top. “Too much romance and razzle dazzle for you huh?”

Ali’s face broke into her nose-crinkling grin. “Yeah, that’s it babe.”

Whitney and Ryan came up the next day for the Horribles parade in Gloucester and, even though it rained off and on for most of the day, managed to have a really good time. Much as Ashlyn tried unsuccessfully for four years to accompany Ali to the Boston Marathon, Ryan had been trying to come to Boston and Gloucester to join Whitney for the 4th of July for the past three years. This was the first year he was in Boston to begin with, and the Boston Cannons were at home that week so it finally worked. Ashlyn would have been just as happy camping out in the living room with Drew and Ali on Sunday and catching up on all her shark week shows she had DVR’d that week. But she wanted to make sure Ryan got a good feel for the festivities so she brought her family down to the parade with Whitney and Ryan and they made the best of it. Dodging the raindrops just meant a lot more time spent in the shops and cafes and pubs in downtown Gloucester and they were all ok with that. They ate too much and drank too much and bought too much to commemorate the holiday. As they usually did, they skipped the concert on the harbor and headed back to the big old house to eat dinner and then get ready to watch the fireworks from the backyard. When it was all over Ryan was very impressed. He said that he would gladly pick Gloucester’s 4th of July over Boston’s any day. No insane crowds or awful traffic or crowded subways – just a nice parade, yummy dinner at the house and then fireworks in your own backyard.

“It doesn’t get any better than this” he enthused halfway through the fireworks show. “No wonder you kept trying to get me to spend 4th of July here with you” he leaned over and gave Whitney a sweet kiss, pulling her attention away from the colorful sky.

“No, it sure doesn’t” Ali said softly as she pressed a warm kiss to Ashlyn’s cheek, just in front of her ear.

She took a minute and admired the beauty lying next to her. The blonde’s face was lit in flashing and dancing light from the explosions coloring the sky above them. Her mouth was in a permanent grin which made her cheeks big and her dimple deep. Her eyebrows raised up when a particularly big firework went off, casting the whole yard in purples and blues for a few seconds.

“You’re missing the show baby” Ashlyn said when she finally turned her head and saw her wife watching the side of her face from the blanket next to her.

The keeper flashed a quick smile at her and returned her face and eyes to the sky as Ali wrapped her arm around the blonde’s stomach and pulled herself into her side. She kissed her cheek again and murmured against Ashlyn’s soft skin.

“No I’m not.”

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Four days later Ali and Sydney got on a plane with their sons and flew to Miami for Deb’s surprise
60th birthday party. Ali, Kyle and Mike had been planning it for a few months and so far, Deb had no idea. She might have expected something to happen that weekend, but not on her actual birthday that Thursday. Ashlyn and the team had an away game in Los Angeles that Saturday and she hated missing the party and the long weekend, but she was happy that Ali and Sydney were finally getting a long weekend in Miami together again. They used to make the trip almost every year when they were younger and single. Ali got to see her mom and also go out and have a mini-vacation with her bestie at the same time. Kyle and Nathan had flown down the day before to make sure everything was all set and then stayed at a hotel so they didn’t ruin the surprise. Mike had rented the private room of one of Deb’s favorite Mexican restaurants for the party. He was going to get her there by taking her out for her birthday dinner, just the two of them.

When Deb stepped into the private dining room, confused by being seated back there even though they were only a party of two, it took her a minute to register what was happening. The mariachi band kicked in and started playing and everybody yelled ‘surprise’ and almost gave the poor woman a heart attack. She screamed in delight when she saw the room full of her friends and family, hugging as many as she could as quickly as possible. She saw Kyle and Nathan right away and fought back tears of joy to have her son with her on such a special day. There were friends from the club and friends from work and even Tammye and Carol had made the three and a half hour drive down for the party. Deb squealed even louder when she finally saw the two young mothers with their beautiful baby boys grinning at her. Deb did cry then, letting those joyful tears fall and not giving a damn. It was a wonderful party and perfect for Deb. She was comfortable and casual and in her favorite restaurant eating her favorite food with her famously favorite Margaritas and laughing her head off. Quintessential Deb. The only thing about that woman that looked or acted 60 years old was her short white hair.

“You did good kids” she smiled at Kyle, Nathan, Ali and Sydney as they sat together halfway through the night. “I was giving Mike a hard time about eating so damned early” she chuckled and gave her husband, who was standing next to her chair with a fresh Margarita for her, a sideways hug around his waist. “I had no idea. What a wonderful surprise.”

Shortly after the party had started and everybody sat down to eat, Sydney excused herself to go to the ladies room. She was in a rush because even though Kyle and Nathan were both watching Cash for her, she knew he would be a mess and covered in food by the time she returned if she didn’t hustle. She had just finished washing her hands when the door opened and Deb came in.

“Geez you move fast girlie” she chuckled as she walked towards Sydney.

“I don’t want my kid to ruin your party” she laughed and opened her arms to receive the hug Deb had come to give her.

After the miscarriage, not even two weeks ago, Deb had called her ‘other daughter’ as she often called Sydney, and offered her condolences and her love and her strength. The little group of four who had known about the pregnancy expanded to include Ken and Vicki and Deb and Kyle and Sydney was glad. She was doing ok and, most importantly, she knew she would keep getting better and stronger and happier. Having the extra love from the rest of her family would only help her. Standing there, enveloped in Deb’s hug for what must have been the millionth time in her life, was the best salve yet for the pain. When she and Ali were little they spent most of their time at the Krieger house because Sandi was always working. Deb was just as much a mother to her as Sandi had been all her life. What Sydney loved about her mom and couldn’t appreciate until she was much older, was that she didn’t resent Deb for the role she played in her own daughter’s life. Sandi was thankful. The coach probably admired that most about her mom. She was strong and brave and humble enough to just be appreciative that somebody took the time and loved her daughter for her when she couldn’t always be there to do it herself. A lot of women would have resented Deb’s
presence or, at the very least, been too proud or envious to become friends with the woman. But Sandi found a way to rise above those petty feelings and she and Deb became very good friends as they raised their daughters together.

“Mama D” Sydney exhaled as she rested her chin on Deb’s shoulder while they hugged.

“Baby girl” Deb soothed as she held her tight and rubbed her back. They hugged for a long few minutes, both trying not to cry. “You’re always so strong Sydney Rae. Always. Even when you were little you were tough as nails. I used to worry that you’d never learn that it was ok to cry sometimes and be sad sometimes” she paused as her voice got stuck in her throat. “I know you know it” she pulled back to look at the coach, “but now is one of those times. You be as sad as you need to be honey. Don’t fight it or it’ll haunt you.”

“I know” Sydney nodded as a tear slipped down her cheek. “I did, I was...I am.” She sniffed and moved to the vanity to grab a tissue. “I’m doing pretty good. Cassius makes it easy to look ahead and focus on the good things” she shared, wisely, as she blew her nose.

“That’s right. Alex is sick of me checking up on you, but she keeps telling me you’re doing better than she can believe sometimes.”

“Yeah, I took a few days and just fell apart and then I put myself back together.” The explanation was so simple but it held so much strength and truth in it. “And I feel better every day, still sad, but better.”

“You know you don’t have to wait for herself to get some free time if you want to come relax in Miami” Deb smiled as they got ready to leave the restroom and rejoin the party. “You can come visit me anytime you want.”

“I know, thank you” Sydney gave her a side hug as they approached the door. “Wait, don’t you have to pee?”

“No, I just wanted to come and see my girl.”

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The Breakers had five games in busy July and then a sixth on August 1st, just before the three week break for the Olympics. All of the International players had been called back to their home countries to train for the major tournament and that included the USWNT players as well. Abby Smith was gone with Rose Lavelle, Megan Oyster and Morgan Andrews and they wouldn’t be back until the last week of August. That meant Ashlyn got to start all of those games. As happy as she was about that development, she had to admit that her body had gotten used to not playing 90 minutes of competitive soccer every single weekend. She was no spring chicken anymore. She would be turning 35 years old in October and her body didn’t bounce back the way it used to. Of course, she would never admit it to anybody except Ali, and even then only because she had no choice. They had been having sex one night towards the end of July and the keeper’s back seized up on her right in the middle of things. Her wife definitely noticed.

“If this is some new kind of torture technique” Ali panted out, close to her release and frustrated by the ill-timed break, “I am not a fan.”

They were on the bed and Ashlyn had been pumping her wife from behind with the strap-on, both watching the action in the big free-standing mirror as they liked to do. She all of a sudden stopped with a strangled groan. The keeper went rigid and then slowly eased herself down onto the bed so she was laying on her side in the middle of the bed, just behind Ali’s sexy ass.
“Ashlyn?” the brunette turned around to look at her wife because she couldn’t see her in the mirror anymore. Ali was already slightly concerned because that was her wife’s favorite position and she wouldn’t stop in the middle of that unless she absolutely had to. “Honey!” the urgency in her voice clear as a bell as she took in the sight of the blonde, pale and sweating with her face creased in pain. “What’s the matter?”

Ali spun around quickly and moved the hair out of her wife’s face so she could see better. She looked up and down her body twice to see if she could see anything that would tell her what the hell was happening. But she couldn’t see anything out of the norm. All she saw was her smoking hot keeper, still wearing the thick, neon green dildo with the knobs sticking out of it that was her very favorite toy. She was afraid to touch her.

“My back” Ashlyn gasped out, even saying those two words caused her enormous pain.

“What happened? What can I do?” the brunette asked, racking her brain trying to think of anything she might have learned in her massage therapy that would help her poor wife.

She couldn’t come up with anything. She knew she could relax the muscles in her back but was it a muscle problem or a structural spine problem? Ashlyn was trying to level out her breathing because the heaving her chest was doing caused her pain too. The keeper was frustrated because she had always taken good care of her body. She couldn’t control the broken bones or dislocated fingers or sprained wrists and elbows she had suffered over the years, but she could always make sure that her muscles were strong and stretched and healthy. She had always been careful about warming up and cooling down just so she wouldn’t have to deal with this sort of thing.

“Is it a muscle thing babe? Or is it something more serious?”

“Not...sure...” she grunted out.

Ali was beginning to panic. She hated to see Ashlyn in so much pain and she felt awful just kneeling there staring at her and not being able to do anything to help her. Who could she call that knew about back pain?

“My mom will know” she said definitively, happy that she remembered that her mother had dealt with a bad back over the past few years. “I’ll go get her.”

It was just before midnight on Monday July 19th and the Breakers had flown home from their road trip to New Jersey the afternoon before. Deb had come to stay with them for the rest of the summer again, having just arrived on Saturday. She was all settled into the front bedroom and probably fast asleep that night. Ali started to get off of the bed and move towards the door to the second floor hallway when she heard another strangled cry.

“Wait!”

The brunette stopped at the foot of the bed and turned back to her keeper.

“What’s wrong? Is it worse?” she asked as she hurried back to the side of the bed.

“Clothes” Ashlyn gasped out and winced from the pain.

“Oh my fucking God” Ali blushed and rolled her eyes at herself as she sprang into action.

She had been about to run, completely naked, to get her mother and bring her back to help her wife who was still strapped up and buck naked too. If she hadn’t been so nervous about Ashlyn’s back she would have cracked up laughing at that one. It took her a few agonizing minutes but she pushed
the big mirror back to its’ usual spot between the fireplace and Ali’s closet by her side of the bed. She put her pajamas on and then she carefully took the strap-on harness off of her keeper and shoved it under the bed for the time being. In another couple of minutes she had Ashlyn’s pajamas on her and that had left them both in tears. The blonde cried from the pain and Ali cried because she had been the cause of it.

“I’ll be right back sweetheart” she kissed her cheek softly and wiped a few tears away from it at the same time. She pulled the sheet and blanket up over Ashlyn who, thankfully, was at least pointed the right direction in the bed. “I’m so sorry.”

Deb came back to check on the patient in her nightgown and housecoat, glasses on her worried face, a few minutes later. She peppered them with questions.

“You just woke up like this?” Deb asked, trying to get the facts so she could try and figure out what might be wrong with Ashlyn’s back. She didn’t see her daughter blush. “Did you stretch or something?”

Ashlyn nodded her head yes and winced. Even if she could have spoken without causing herself immense pain she would never admit that she had hurt her back reaching around to fondle her wife’s breasts as she fucked her from behind with her favorite dildo. Technically, she had indeed hurt her back while stretching to reach the breasts she hadn’t been able to touch very much for so long.

“Ok well you were just on a plane yesterday and you went to training today...you’ve never had this happen before?”

The keeper shook her head no and grimaced again.

“Is it your lower back?”

She nodded yes.

“Is it better or worse now than when it first started?”

Ashlyn just whimpered again.

“I think it’s the same” Ali offered.

“It sounds like it’s just a muscle spasm” Deb said thoughtfully as she stood next to the bed. “But they hurt like hell. Believe me, I know. I thought I was going to die the first time I had one” she chuckled and gently put her hand on her daughter-in-law’s hip.

“What can we do for it?”

“She needs to ice it and she should take some ibuprofen. That helps sometimes. Some people prefer a heating pad to the ice, it all depends on what your muscles are going to respond to and we won’t know until we try. But they always tell you to start with ice.”

Ali was back in five minutes with water, ibuprofen and an ice pack and she helped her mother roll the keeper over onto her stomach.

“You shouldn’t be on your side. Lie on your back or your stomach if you can” Deb instructed as Ashlyn groaned through the pain. “This is a weird place to be sleeping in the bed anyway” Deb shook her head and frowned at the blonde down and in the middle of the queen-sized bed. “Let’s get her back up where she should be so we don’t have to move her again.”
Ali stifled a giggle and helped her keeper back into her normal sleeping area on her side of the bed. Ashlyn had her eyes squeezed shut and tears were starting to slide out of them from the pain of moving.

“I know that hurt honey” Ali cooed and kissed her cheek. “You did good and you won’t have to move again. Here comes the ice, ok?”

Deb went over some last-minute instructions and advice and then went back to bed after hugging her daughter and gently patting Ashlyn’s arm.

“Try and get some sleep, that helps too” she urged as she closed the door behind her.

It was a long night. Ali set her alarm and iced Ashlyn’s back for twenty minutes and then they both slept for ninety minutes before applying a new ice pack. They kept at that cycle all night and finally, at about 8am, the keeper started to feel the muscles ease up a bit. Ashlyn called Dani, the Breakers’ trainer, and explained the situation. The trainer knew that Ali was a skilled massage therapist and as much as she would have preferred to have the keeper come in to the facility for treatment that morning she knew that the hour-long car ride would probably do more harm than her official massage would do good.

“Just keep doing what you’re doing for today and put Ali on the phone” Dani instructed.

She went over some things with the brunette, who had already googled lower back muscle spasms and the massage techniques that were recommended. Ali was happy that Dani’s instructions were almost the same as what she had planned to try anyway.

“Call me right away if anything changes or if you have any questions.”

“Thanks Dani, we will” Ali replied and ended the call.

The good news that day was that Ashlyn’s back started to feel better pretty quickly. She responded well to the massage therapy and the icing had been effective too. By late afternoon she felt like a new person and was thankful for it, and her wife’s careful ministrations.

The bad news that day was that Drew wanted to be with his mama while she spent time in the big bed trying to get her back right. Nobody wanted to say no, but all three women were afraid he would somehow cause the blonde to aggravate the muscles again. He was fourteen months old and he was active and curious and into everything. His favorite thing to do that summer was to pick things up and put them into something else. An empty laundry basket was his preferred collection device and he would push it around and put things into it. Anything he saw and could pick up. His toys, Ashlyn’s shoes, dog toys, mail, dustbunnies – if his sharp little eyes saw it, he would not rest until he picked it up and put it in his laundry basket.

Late that afternoon Deb was downstairs getting his dinner ready and Ali had gone up to the office to make a few phone calls before they had dinnertime together. Drew was pushing his laundry basket around the master bedroom and the hall and his nursery. The house had been childproofed and there were childproof gates everywhere so he couldn’t go up or down stairs or into rooms they didn’t want him in or couldn’t supervise him in. The tv at the foot of the bed played one of his favorite shows and he was listening to it and trying to talk along with it as he moved around the room. Ashlyn was feeling better but was still supposed to be taking it easy. It hurt a lot to get up or lie down, but once she was standing up or lying down her back felt pretty good. Definite improvement. She lay there on her side of the bed and talked to her son and played with his toys as best she could, while he enjoyed the largest area of the room, right next to her. After a little while he cocked his head to the side and said one of his big three words, ‘ball’, as he pointed at the bed.
“This is a bed” Ashlyn clarified, enunciating the words carefully for her boy and touching the side of the bed beneath her.

Drew got onto his stomach and looked under the bed and said it again.

“Ball.”

“Is there a ball under there buddy?” she asked with a smile. “We have a million of them in this house so you’re probably right.”

“Mama” he stood up excitedly and looked at Ashlyn. “Ball.”

“Ok, well go get it.”

The toddler walked around the foot of the bed to Ali’s side with a determined look on his face and disappeared from view. The keeper chuckled when she saw his dark head drop out of her sight.

“Ball” she heard again, slightly muffled.

“Dinner’s ready!” Deb called from the kitchen, her voice carrying right up the back stairs.

“Thanks Deb!” the blonde replied, idly wondering who was going to come carry Drew downstairs for dinner.

“Ball!” Drew said excitedly as he popped back up by Ali’s side of the bed with the object of his search in his hands and a huge, accomplished smile on his face.

“Good boy Drew...” Ashlyn stopped speaking as soon as those three words left her lips and she saw what her son was holding in his hands.

“I’m coming up for my grandson” Deb said cheerfully from the bottom of the back stairs.

Ashlyn could hear her footsteps as Deb started her climb and the blonde began to panic, her eyes widening as she looked at her son holding the thick, neon-green dildo with the knobs sticking out of it and the nylon harness still attached to it.

“Drew, come here big boy” she encouraged, a hint of urgency in her voice. “Bring mama the ball.”

He giggled and backed up as soon as he could tell that Ashlyn wanted what was in his hands.

“Drew” Ashlyn tried a sterner voice and attempted to sit up but the pain was too intense and it knocked her back.

“I hope you’re hungry Drew” Deb’s voice came from halfway up the backstairs. “Grandma made your favorite.”

“Drew, bring mama the ball now.”

But the playful boy just giggled again and backed up towards the fireplace.

“Ball!”

“Dang these gates” Deb complained from the top of the backstairs. “Sometimes I have such a hard time...”

“Andrew, you bring mama that ball right now” the keeper said as forcefully as she had ever said
anything to her young son.

He looked at her and his lip quivered as he tried to comprehend the serious look on her face.

“Everything ok Ash?” Deb asked from the gate, still out of sight and on the other side of it at the top of the back stairs.

“Yep, all good Deb...” the blonde tried to hide the fear in her voice.

Ashlyn gritted her teeth and rolled over twice to get to Ali’s side of the bed, pain crashing down all around her.

“Drew...”

“Hey, what’s going on in here?” Ali asked as she walked into the room from the hallway with a curious smile on her face. “I heard the full name so I know he did something...holy fucking shit.”

“Finally” Deb exhaled and chuckled. “They say these gates are childproof but, honestly, they’re grandparent proof too sometimes.”

She walked into the bedroom and cocked her head to the side at what she saw. Drew’s face was scrunched up and about to erupt in tears as he looked at Ali who was standing in front of the fireplace holding her son on her hip and looking flushed and out of breath. Ashlyn was lying on Ali’s side of the bed, with her eyes closed, grimacing in pain.

“What happened here? Ashlyn are you ok, you don’t look too good.”

“Mom, can you please take him down?” Ali asked as she walked around the foot of the bed, her voice was all business as her mind reeled at how close her mother had come to walking in to find her grandson playing with her daughter’s favorite dildo. “I’m going to help her up and we’ll be right down.”

Drew started to cry, loudly, as the brunette handed him to her mother.

“I’m sorry. He was just playing with...something he wasn’t supposed to and he’s upset because I took it away from him” Ali explained, her voice raised so her mother could hear her over the wailing of her boy. “Can you please wash his hands for me?”

“Aw, come here baby” she cooed as she held her grandson close and watched Ali unlock the gate to the backstairs for them. “You got yourself into trouble huh? You have to listen to your mama. It’s ok. Shhhhh...it’s ok baby boy.”

Ali closed the gate behind them, took a deep breath, exhaled and walked back to her side of the bed.

“Are you ok babe? How did you get all the way over here?” she asked and put her hand on Ashlyn’s clammy forehead and lightly kissed her lips.

“I just need a minute” the keeper answered quietly. “I almost had a fucking heart attack.”

“You and me both” the brunette giggled as she caressed her wife’s face.

“I’ve never ever seen you move so fast” Ashlyn smiled up at her beautiful brunette. “God, I can’t believe that just happened.”

Ali shuddered as she imagined the outcome if she had come down from the office even one minute
later. That was a conversation she definitely did not want to have with her mother. Ever.

“You rest for another minute and I’ll take care of this and then we can go downstairs. Ok?”

She got on her hands and knees and reached under the bed for the toy she had just thrown back under it the second after she ripped it out of her toddler’s hands. She went into the bathroom and washed it, dried it and put it away in the box in her closet where they had moved their sex toys when her nightstand drawer became too cramped for all of them.

“I don’t know if I’m more upset about him finding your favorite dildo or him thinking it was a ball” Ashlyn chuckled as Ali moved to the side of the bed to help her to her feet.

“Is that what he called it?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Well I guess if he was going to use one of the three words he knows, ‘ball’ is closer than ‘doggie’ or ‘mama’” Ali chuckled.

“I think ‘mama’ would be more accurate, honestly...” the keeper smirked.

“Ready, one, two, three...” she counted and then pulled the blonde to her feet. Ashlyn groaned and screwed her face up as she fought through the pain. “Good job honey.”

“God that sucks” the keeper sighed and then leaned forward and hugged her wife. “But this doesn’t.”

“Are you ok on the stairs? I want to get down there before he turns into a total brat for my mom.” She pecked her wife’s lips again and moved towards the backstairs.

“Yep. I’m good. I’ll be down in a minute. Save me a seat” she joked.

“Hey” Ali stopped at the top of the stairs and waited for her wife to look at her before continuing in a loud whisper. “Thanks for sacrificing your body to try and get that from him. I appreciate it” she said with a warm, sincere smile.

“Yeah, I couldn’t let Deb see that” she grinned and winked at her wife. “As much as I would have enjoyed watching you try to explain to your mom what the knobs were for...”
Ashlyn’s back spasms cleared up in time for her to start the next game that Saturday when the Breakers hosted the Portland Thorns in the Lifetime TV Game of the Week. It was a slightly different game without most of Portland’s star players, and some of Boston’s, who were away training for the Olympics. The Breakers got the win and Ashlyn even got a clean sheet which was a real rarity against the high-scoring Thorns offense. They had a fast turnaround as the league had to cram as many games in as they could before and then immediately following the Olympic break. The Breakers flew to Minnesota on Tuesday afternoon for their next game that Wednesday night. Then they were flying home on Thursday to get ready for their home game against Los Angeles Saturday afternoon. It was one of those tough stretches of three games in the span of eight days and, combined with the travel, it took a toll on the team. Especially the older players with nagging injuries like Ashlyn Harris. But after that LA game on August 1st they didn’t have to report back to the team until Monday August 24th. Three weeks off. Any player that was nursing an injury was really happy about it because it would allow them to get healthy and rested and ready for the final push towards the championship and their last nine games of the regular season. Boston was still at the top of the table and had no plans to give up their spot without a fight.

The Tuesday they flew to Minnesota was July 28th and it was Ali’s 36th birthday. Ashlyn had been warned by her trainer to take it easy on her back, especially with the three games in eight days schedule they were dealing with. She was stubborn, but she wasn’t stupid. She had known players who had back injuries end their playing careers and she didn’t want that to be how she went out. She took it easy. She went to training early and stayed late to get extra treatments on her back to try and keep it loose and flexible so it wouldn’t seize up on her again and keep her off the pitch. Without Abby Smith around their back-up keeper was an amateur who was still in their academy program who was training with the team full time to help lighten the load on Ashlyn while her back was acting up. Nobody wanted to have to put her into a game. She was just a warm body until Abby came back to the team.

“Ash, let’s just relax this week ok?” Ali begged her wife the day after the Portland game. They were hanging out at the beach with Drew and Deb Sunday afternoon. “I don’t want to do anything for my birthday except give you a nice massage and watch a movie or something, ok?”

“Baby, your mom’s here and I’m at least taking you out for dinner...”

“Not if I don’t want you to” the brunette challenged with a quirk of her eyebrow. “Remember? Some day when your career is over we’ll celebrate things on the days they actually happen. But for now, we’ll be smart and do the best we can...”

“But Al, it’s your birthday” the keeper cocked her head and pouted at her wife as they sat side by side in lounge chairs. “It’s my favorite day of the year and I want to spoil you.”

“I know how you feel. It happens to me almost every year. Remember the one year you just wanted to lie around the house and watch Netflix and play video games on your birthday?” she put her hand on Ashlyn’s thigh and squeezed it as she spoke.
“Yeah” the blonde admitted and looked down sheepishly.

“I’m not trying to make you feel bad babe” Ali squeezed her thigh again and caressed it. “That was a great day and I loved spending it with you. But my point is, it was your birthday and we did what you wanted to do. I wanted to take you someplace special and spoil you rotten.”

“But you didn’t because I asked you not to” Ashlyn exhaled and leaned her head back against the chair, resigned.

“So let’s just relax and hang out together and take care of your back and enjoy my birthday the way I want to spend it this year, ok?” she patted Ashlyn’s thigh and leaned her head over, pursing her lips for a kiss.

“Ok” she agreed and kissed her lips softly. “But only if we can have birthday sex” she whispered as soon as their lips parted and Ali was still less than an inch away.

“We’ll see” Ali giggled and kissed the blonde once more before settling back in her chair with a grin.

It had been a week since their last naked encounter had been so unceremoniously interrupted and they were both still feeling the sting of unfulfilled desire. It had been a long week. Being on the beach in bathing suits showing lots of skin and tattoos always got them both worked up and that day was no exception. They caressed each other’s thighs and hips until Deb and Drew literally shook cold water on them with laughs and giggles several minutes later.

When Ali came home from work late Monday afternoon she found Sydney and Cash, Sandi, Ken, Vicki, Tanner, Koty and Whitney all waiting for her. She knew Ashlyn, Drew and her mom were planning to celebrate her birthday that night since the keeper would be gone on her actual birthday night, but she never expected anybody else to be there. She greeted everybody in the backyard because that’s where they were all watching Koty’s pup, Bandit – now four months old, chasing Fred around. After a round of hugs and kisses she excused herself to go change her clothes, heart melting when Drew wanted to go with her. She scooped him up, covered his face in kisses until he giggled uncontrollably and carried him upstairs with her.

Ashlyn followed her a few minutes later just to make sure the excited toddler wasn’t giving her any trouble. Drew was happily playing with one of his toys near the dressing table, babbling to himself and making all kinds of adorable sounds. The keeper walked past him and around the foot of the bed to her wife who was standing half undressed in front of her closet up by the head of her side of the bed.

“Hi baby” Ashlyn kissed her bare shoulder as she hugged her from behind. “I missed you today.”

Ali turned in her arms and kissed her soundly, taking the keeper by surprise and making her whimper into the kiss.

“I missed you too” Ali breathed out when they came up for air. “How’s your back?” she asked, still holding her wife close and playing with the hairs at the back of her neck as she watched her face for the answer to the question.

“It’s pretty good. Dani worked on it a lot today so I’ll be ok on the flight tomorrow, hopefully” the blonde replied and rubbed her hands up and down Ali’s sides as she held her.

“I have an idea” the brunette began with a smirk, “but it’s ok if you don’t want to do it…”

“I can tell you right now, based on the look on your face, I absolutely want to do it.”
Ali giggled and brought their lips together in another lingering kiss.

“Good. I think it’ll be good. We’ll have to see” she bit her bottom lip as she studied her wife’s face for a minute and then smiled.

Ali explained her idea, reaching into her closet for the box with the ben wa balls in it as both sets of eyes darkened lustfully. They had been practicing with the ben wa balls since they first got them the Christmas before Ali started her MBA and Gram died. They had both gotten better at them, Ali in particular because she worked with them a lot as she prepared to give birth last year. But, because she had given birth the year before, she had sort of relapsed a little and would need to start strengthening her pelvic floor muscles again for their next baby. Neither woman was interested in having some embarrassing ben wa ball situation in front of their family that evening, but they were both excited to start some slow-burning foreplay early. They knew it would be an early night and if they could sit through a couple of hours of dinner, and then cake and ice cream, followed by an hour of getting Drew bathed and put to bed, they would be able to have some great, possibly amazing, sex before Ali’s birthday even officially started.

They kissed for a few more minutes and Ali cupped her keeper’s core, hoping to get her girl wet so she’d have an easier time getting the ben wa ball inside her. She shivered when she felt Ashlyn grind down against her hand for a second.

“Are you wet babe?” she breathed out and looked at Ashlyn’s face and her darkening hazel eyes.

“Yeah” the keeper moaned softly. “I’m ready.”

Ali gave her the ben wa ball she thought would work best for their plan, a medium sized stainless steel ball with another ball inside it, and patted her ass as she walked away from her towards the bathroom to put it in. The brunette finished getting changed and took her ben wa ball, a slightly heavier one than Ashlyn had, and silicone rather than stainless. Hers was also a double ball and, although she initially planned to use two balls, she chickened out and went with just one instead, like Ashlyn. She just wasn’t willing to risk any problems that night in front of their guests.

They feasted on seafood take-out from their favorite local seafood shack as they sat around the dining room table. The room was full with just enough room for Drew’s highchair in the corner, right between his two moms who watched him eat his dinner and drink from his sippy cup like a champ. They exchanged looks but nothing more. They weren’t trying to torture each other, just get nice and warmed up for later.

“You just stay right where you are Alex” Deb said firmly when her daughter started to get up and clear the table as they finished eating.

The brunette sat and helped Ashlyn clean up their son and his tray and then watched while Sandi, Vicki, Deb and Ken cleaned everything up like a well-trained waitstaff. The keeper winked at her when she came back into the room and replaced Drew’s tray and kissed both her wife and son on the tops of their identical brunette heads. The lights were turned low and everybody started singing ‘Happy Birthday’ to her as Ken carried a large sheet cake into the dining room and placed it in front of his surprised and emotional daughter. Ali looked up at him and then quickly over his shoulder at her mother who was singing and grinning at her. The brunette fought back her tears as she got choked up. She felt her wife squeeze her shoulder from behind her and instantly felt better. When she had made her fun plans for later in the evening she hadn’t expected so many non-sexual feelings to hit her so powerfully.

“Make a wish baby girl” Deb encouraged quietly, standing next to her, still grinning.
Ali took her mother’s hand and squeezed it as she blew out her candles, thankfully just a ‘3’ and a ‘6’ and not 36 individual candles that probably would have started a fire. The emotions that swept over her were strong as she looked at the cake and felt her heart fill all the way up.

“Thank you so much mom” she pulled her mother down into a strong hug. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too Alex.”

The cake was shaped like a ‘3’ and a ‘6’ and frosted in pink icing with white accents and flowers, and a soccer ball, just as it would have been on her 6th birthday. Ali couldn’t believe her mother had gone to all the trouble to make her a cake like that after all those years. She wondered if there were coins wrapped in aluminum foil inside the pieces of cake like there used to be too. And was the special button hidden as well?

“Be careful while you’re eating your cake now everybody” Deb explained as she cut the cake and placed pieces on the plates that Vicki and Sandi handed her. “There’s a surprise in every piece.”

They all ate their cake and ice cream and found their aluminum-foil wrapped coins inside each piece of cake. Ali told the story of growing up getting these beautiful cakes every year and how the coins and the button worked with the kid who found the button in their cake winning the prize. Cash’s piece had the button and he got a cute new toy to play with and squealed with delight.

“What was in your piece” Ashlyn leaned over and quietly asked her wife as the conversation continued around them.

“I don’t think there’s anything in mine” the brunette answered with a small frown, but not really disappointed.

“Oh, there’s something in there, you’d better keep looking” the keeper winked.

“Ashlyn...” Ali breathed out when she finally found the aluminum foil in her piece of cake and opened it up. “It’s beautiful. Thank you so much honey” she enthused and leaned across their son to give her wife a big kiss.

The keeper had bought her beautiful brunette a delicate white gold necklace with a small, pear-shaped ruby pendant hanging from it, her birthstone. When she had heard about Deb’s cake surprise she quickly asked if she could piggyback on it and use the aluminum foil to give Ali her birthday present. Deb thought it was a great idea and put it into the cake with all the other coins and the button. The trick was making sure she gave the correct piece of cake to the birthday girl. But both she and Ashlyn had paid close attention, it was in the top part of the ‘6’, and everything worked just as planned.

“Thank you all so much for everything” Ali smiled as people finished their cake and ice cream in the dining room. “This has been the most wonderful birthday and I really appreciate you all coming tonight to share it with me. I love you guys so much.”

The party was short but sweet. It was a Monday night so nobody expected it to last too long. There were toddlers to get bathed and put to bed and professional athletes who needed their rest before they travelled halfway across the country the next day. After everyone had left, Ali gave her mom another enormous hug before heading up the backstairs for the night.

“I can’t believe you made me that cake Mom. You’re just the absolute best mom in the whole world and I’m the luckiest daughter on the planet.”

“Aw, you’re welcome honey. I’m glad you liked it” Deb grinned at her girl as they pulled apart.
“Making Drew’s with you really made me miss doing it for my own kids” she chuckled. “I should be thanking you for tolerating my trip down memory lane.”

When Ashlyn had finished putting Drew to bed she came into the master bedroom and was very happy to find her wife rocking in the glider with a smile on her face. Her eyes were closed and her cheeks were slightly flushed. The keeper felt her core twitch as she gazed at her beautiful brunette, the ben wa ball inside her making the twitch feel extra delicious.

“Feeling good, gorgeous?” she asked, her voice low and lustful as she sat on the gliding footstool in front of Ali.

“Mmmmm Hmmm. Very” the brunette opened her eyes and focused them on her keeper as she spoke slowly. The hungry look in them made Ashlyn even wetter than she already had been. “How about you?” she quirked an eyebrow and put her foot in the blonde’s crotch, pressing it against her mound through her shorts.

“I’m dying to fuck you Al.”

Ashlyn’s words made the brunette so excited and wet that she got lightheaded for a minute. Ali pursed her lips and smirked.

“Well what are you waiting for?” she challenged in the sexiest voice the keeper had heard in a long time.

In a show of sheer strength, Ashlyn dragged the glider right up to the footstool and then pulled her surprised wife out of it and onto her lap so Ali straddled her with a gasp. The brunette regained her composure and crashed their lips together in a steamy kiss as their hands roamed and groped and squeezed. They made out for several minutes, the heat of the kiss rising with every passing second. They were chest to chest and as close together as humanly possible as they moaned into each other’s mouth. Ashlyn had her left hand firmly on Ali’s ass while she reached around the brunette with her right arm and teasingly pressed a long finger to her entrance from behind.

“Oh yeah babe” Ali gasped as they broke the kiss to catch their breath. “Mmmmm...you’re so fucking sexy.”

The keeper panted for a minute and moved her mouth to Ali’s neck, nibbling her way down to her pulse point and then back up again. She used her left hand to help move the crotch of the brunette’s shorts and panties aside so she could push one finger inside her wet pussy. Ali moaned and responded by starting to grind against her wife’s finger.

“Fuck” she breathed out as she closed her eyes and tilted her head back, enjoying the feeling between her legs.

Ashlyn sucked on her newly exposed neck with a moan of her own, trying to be careful not to leave a big hickey in her wake. They used to enjoy marking each other’s soft skin as they lost control. Five and a half years into their relationship, they were more careful about where they left their love bites. The more difficult challenge they tried to achieve those days was to suck and bite just to the point where the bruise would form, and stop before it actually did. It wasn’t easy.

The feeling of her keeper’s finger inside her, moving with the ben wa ball, was wonderful and was making Ali’s core pulse and pull. She was more than ready for her release after her evening with the toy inside her.

“Goddamn you feel good” Ashlyn exhaled against her neck. “I love being inside you...fuck baby...”
The only thing that stopped the blonde from picking her wife up and carrying her the three feet to the bed was her back. Ashlyn knew that she would never hear the end of it if she pulled her back again after working so hard to get it feeling better. Instead, she fought the urge and pulled her finger out of Ali’s core and brought it up to her lips. She licked it clean while Ali slowly opened her dark eyes to watch. She got off of Ashlyn’s lap and took a step back before removing all of her clothes. She kept her eyes locked on her wife as she did it and, when she was naked, she moved to the bed and pulled the covers down to the foot of it.

“Come here” she invited with another hungry look, lounging across the bed and posing provocatively.

The keeper stripped her clothes off and joined her beautiful brunette on the bed, hovering over her before kissing her deeply and lowering her body on top of hers with another moan. She brought her hands to Ali’s breasts and started caressing them and massaging them with a perfect blend of tenderness and purpose. It was wonderful to be able to play with them again after so long. Yes, they had been bigger during her pregnancy and breastfeeding, but they were frustratingly off-limits because they were too sensitive, swollen and sore. Not anymore. Ashlyn spent a long time sucking on Ali’s dark nipples as she groaned with pleasure in response.

“God did I miss these babies” Ashlyn smiled as she pulled her lips off of a breast with a pop. “I’ve always loved your boobs, but I don’t think I appreciated them enough, you know?” she took a minute and admired the rigid, deep rose colored nipples as they stood at attention among several small red marks and the beginnings of a few bruises.

“Well don’t stop now” Ali panted out, so worked up already her chest was starting to heave. She squirmed underneath the sexy blonde and scratched at her back and ass with her short nails trying to spur her on and increase the incredible sensations she was starting to feel racing through her body. She bit her bottom lip, arched her back and gave Ashlyn a smoldering look. “Fuck me babe...I need you, now.”

Ashlyn teetered in that place where she was so overwhelmed with desire and lust that she stopped functioning for a quick minute, but regained control and gave her wife a searing kiss that made Ali squeal quietly in response. She pressed her thigh between the brunette’s and let her start grinding against it, keeping her hands on Ali’s breasts as she kissed her mouth even harder. Their smooth bodies felt like silk as they moved against each other, hands never stopping as they travelled across ribs and hips and tattoos and breasts. Ali’s face and neck were flushed and getting redder by the minute as she climbed towards her release. The ben wa ball in her pussy felt amazing as she kept grinding against her keeper’s strong thigh.

“Ashlyn” she gasped out, breaking the kiss so she could breathe. Her head was back against the pillow and her eyes were closed as she panted and turned her head to the side so the blonde’s hungry lips could slide over to her neck. “Jesus...” she grabbed Ashlyn’s thigh with both hands and held it as tightly as she could against her wet center.

The keeper tried to move up the bed but couldn’t escape the strong hold of her brunette on her leg.

“I’ve got you sexy” she said, out of breath. “Let me move up here...”

Ali’s brain was barely processing words anymore but when the blonde touched her hands she released the strong thigh with a whimper. Ashlyn quickly re-positioned herself near the head of the bed, sitting with her legs spread out while the brunette moved her arms and clutched at her, desperate for more contact. The keeper took her wife’s arms and pulled her torso onto her lap, Ali’s
back to her front. The brunette was laying across Ashlyn’s lap at an angle, her butt still on the bed, resting between her keeper’s legs. This way the blonde could still kiss her lips or lean down and kiss her breasts while her hands worked on the more urgent area between her legs. As she bent down and took Ali’s lips in her own, she propped a pillow under the brunette’s head which was up near her own breast.

Ali whimpered and then moaned into the kiss as she felt Ashlyn’s strong fingers stroking her soaking wet folds and spreading her lips out. The brunette bent both her knees up and sucked hard on her wife’s tongue inside her mouth. The keeper circled Ali’s clit a couple of times and teased her entrance with her fingertips as she made sure everything was wet and waiting for her.

“Do you want it in or out” she husked out, pulling away from Ali’s lips for a second. The brunette opened her eyes, confused, and blinked at her wife above her. “The ben wa ball?”

“Out, out, take it out...I just want your fingers. Fuck, please put your fingers inside me Ash.”

When she heard the desperation in Ali’s voice, Ashlyn’s passion pooled between her own legs as lust filled her entire brain. She reached inside the brunette’s hot, wet center and pulled the toy out. It slid easily through all of the juices and Ashlyn wasted no time pushing her two middle fingers right back inside her wife’s hungry pussy.

“Yesssss...” Ali moaned loudly and bit her bottom lip hard. “Fuck, yes.”

Ashlyn loved holding her like this. Ali was not a petite, tiny thing and the keeper loved feeling the weight of her muscles and toned body as it shifted and rolled and moved over hers. It was fucking sexy as hell holding her close like that while she thrust her fingers deep inside of her, making her groan and grunt in pleasure.

“Unhhhhh, yeah babe, so fucking good...unnnhhh...”

“Jesus, you’re gorgeous” Ashlyn said seductively as her hot breath tickled the brunette’s ear. She kissed and licked the outer edge of her ear and then sucked her earlobe into her mouth with a moan. “I love you.”

Ali could feel her orgasm gathering steam and tilted her hips up hoping to speed it along even more. She grabbed onto her keeper’s right thigh with her right hand, digging her nails into the soft flesh and strong muscle there. Her left arm moved to her own clit and started rubbing it while Ashlyn’s free hand continued pinching and tugging on her nipples and breasts.

“Yes, I’m so close...” she panted out and sped up her finger on her clit.

Ashlyn brought their lips together in a sloppy kiss that they both panted and gasped into before breaking it. She moved her lips back to Ali’s neck and throat, nipping the skin there and then licking it. She was just about to pull her fingers out and add a third when the brunette came hard, exploding in jerks and spasms as the orgasm arrived with a bang.

“Fuuuuuuucckk” she yelled, louder than she probably should have with her mother in the house. At least Deb wasn’t in the guest room that summer. The added distance of one more room between them made the brunette feel more comfortable, apparently.

Ashlyn kept her fingers inside her but slowed them way down, enjoying how tightly Ali’s walls squeezed them. She kissed the side of her wife’s face and her forehead and her cheeks as the brunette shook and twitched through her orgasm. The keeper trailed her fingertips around her beautiful, heaving breasts, moving them down her clenching stomach and between her hips leaving
goosebumps behind. Ali let out a low, satisfied moan and held her fingers, wet with her own passion, up to Ashlyn’s lips so she could suck on them. The keeper happily obliged and then pulled her fingers out and licked those clean too, watching her beautiful brunette’s face the whole time.

“Why is that sooo sexy?” she asked in another gasp, still out of breath, as she watched the blonde’s mouth make quick work of her own fingers.

“How are you sooooo sexy?” Ashlyn replied with a smirk. “Look at how fucking gorgeous you are” she raked her eyes up and down Ali’s still twitching body as she tried to get her breathing back to normal. “I swear to God...you are just magnificent Al.”

“I don’t know about that” she said in a throaty chuckle as she pulled her wife’s face down for a slow kiss. “But you make me feel magnificent, that’s for damned sure.”

“Happy early Birthday baby” Ashlyn grinned at her. “I don’t know how I’m the one getting this present right now when it’s your birthday” she looked up and down her wife’s still-recovering body again before returning her eyes to her favorite whiskey-colored ones, “But I’ll gladly take it.”

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NBC Sports had the rights to broadcast the 2020 Olympic summer games from Tokyo, Japan that August and they hired Ashlyn and Heather O’Reilly to work with their in-studio broadcast team. The Stamford, CT studio was less than an hour outside of New York City and NBC Sports was putting Ashlyn up in a fancy hotel in Stamford for the two and a half weeks she would be on the air working for them. It took some finagling and some pretty intensive planning, but the couple finally worked out a schedule that they were both happy with for the month. The soccer schedule in the Olympics, much like the World Cup the summer before, had six games in sixteen calendar days. The USWNT was guaranteed to play the first three games in their Group stage. If they did well enough over those three games they could go on and play in the Quarterfinals. If they won that match then they would go on and play in the Semi-finals. If they won that game then they would be competing for a medal. At first the keeper had wanted to do something like they had done last summer for the World Cup where she flew in and out as quickly as possible so she could get home to her family and the big old house. Ali had other ideas this time.

For the first nine days she and Drew went and stayed with Ashlyn at the hotel in Stamford, CT. On the four days that the keeper worked in the studio they hung out at the hotel and played in the pool. Kyle came out to visit them for those days and Nathan did too when his schedule allowed. It was an easy train ride, about 45 minutes as long as you weren’t riding at rush hour. During the other five days when she wasn’t working in the studio, Ashlyn hung out with them or accompanied them into NYC to visit Kyle and do some sightseeing. Kyle and Nathan babysat one night for them so they could go out on the town and catch a Broadway show with Heather O’Reilly and her husband Dave. It was an excellent working vacation for both Ashlyn and Ali. The brunette was in full Knight-Harris mode, taking advantage of the unique time and setting to make all sorts of new contacts at NBC Sports and other companies in the big apple. K-H had several athletes participating in the Olympics and two of their agents were in Tokyo for the duration. Jen came down to Stamford too and helped Ali with the NYC crowd. It was pretty great and the brunette went to sleep each night in a state of disbelief that this was her life and she had really built this company and was now leading it to new heights.

The other beneficiary of the nine days away was Deb. She had Mike come up and they stayed together in the big old house and had their own New England summer vacation. The whole NYC trip hinged on whether Deb was ok with the plan. Not only was she ok with it, she loved it. She went with them to Stamford for the first three days and spent time with Kyle and Nathan before
Mike came up for the full week afterwards. Everybody was happy. Even the dogs who got to stay home for the most part.

As natural and easy as Ashlyn had been the year before during the World Cup, she was more polished and professional this time. The keeper was still her charming and authentic self, but she looked even more at ease in front of the camera. Maybe having Heather O’Reilly with her made her even more comfortable. The rest of the on-set talent was great to work with too, but the best foursome they found to ‘work the table’ as they called it, was Rebecca Lowe as the host with Ashlyn, Heather and Tim Howard the retired keeper from the USMNT. He and Ashlyn were friendly already as members of the exclusive goalkeeper’s union, but they really hit it off as they spent more time together. They were practically twins in a lot of ways. They were both active, aggressive sweeper keeper style goalkeepers, they both had tons of tattoos, they both came from troubled and difficult childhoods and they were both brave enough to speak their minds honestly and smart enough to not get in too much trouble doing it. Thank goodness Rebecca Lowe was there to reign in the excitable threesome. They were all passionate about soccer and had no problem arguing their points of view.

Ali and Jen had gone with Ashlyn and Heather, who was also a client of K-H, to the first day to make sure everything was as it should be. As they stood off to the side watching the ‘on-air talent’ do their thing towards the end of the first day it was obvious that Ashlyn Harris had a bright future in front of her if she wanted it.

“Is she really as good as I think she is?” Ali softly asked her colleague, not taking her eyes off of the charismatic blonde. “Sometimes I have to check myself because, well, I love her” she explained to Jen with a sheepish smile. “Tell me the truth now.”

“She’s really good Ali” Jen confirmed with her own smile. “It’s not your bias” she chuckled quietly. “It’s legit. She’s a natural. She can do this for a very long time if she wants to. Does she want to?”

“I’m not sure” the brunette answered honestly. “I think she was afraid the World Cup was a fluke or something. Now, after this, we can have a real discussion about it and get some things mapped out for her.”

“Good” Jen agreed with a nod of her head. “There are broadcasting classes and programs she can take to practice and hone her skills. If she’s serious about it, that’s the next step.”

As Ali stood there watching she couldn’t help thinking about what a difference a year had made in her wife’s performance on camera. She was a year older and wiser. She wasn’t sleep-deprived from being a new mom. She had more time to study the teams playing in the tournament so she was better able to talk about seemingly random facts and data with surprising ease. She was a fucking rockstar and she killed it that August. Ali beamed with pride.
The USWNT won their group, defeating Norway and Nigeria and playing to a draw with the home team, Japan. They beat a talented and feisty Australian team in the Quarterfinal match that saw their starting goalkeeper go down with a serious knee injury. Abby Smith, Ashlyn’s back-up with the Breakers, had to come in and play to help the team secure the win. The talk at the broadcast desk after the game focused on Abby Smith and if she could play well enough to not lose the next game for the USWNT. Ashlyn tried to bite her tongue as all sorts of ‘experts’ weighed in on the topic via satellite from around the country. She did pretty well until Alexi Lalas opened his big mouth and declared definitively that Smith would wind up losing the gold medal for the USWNT. Ashlyn couldn’t take it. She waited for him to finish and then interrupted Rebecca Lowe to reply to his comments. She tried to keep her voice even and professional but it was hard not to notice the passion running underneath her calm façade.

“First of all, I’m not sure where you got your crystal ball from Alexi” she grinned, trying to keep it light, “but to say that one player is going to be responsible for the demise of an entire team is just ridiculous. I mean, that’s a catchy soundbite, but you know that’s not how it works.” She shook her head a little dismissively and turned her body to face the people at the desk and away from the big screen they had Lalas’ face on via satellite feed. “Even if Abby has a terrible game there are still ten other players on the pitch who will be working their tails off to make sure they win this next game. And, for the record, I think Abby Smith is an incredible goalkeeper. She has all the skills you need to be elite and playing at this level. And, for the record, I think Abby Smith is an incredible goalkeeper. She has all the skills you need to be elite and playing at this level. And she also has those intangibles that you can’t teach a young player. They’ve either got them or they don’t. And I can tell you from personal experience, training with her every day, she’s the real deal and she will do a tremendous job. She’ll make the team and our country proud. You mark my words. I’m calling it right now. The US will win the gold medal and Abby Smith will play well.”

‘Can Abby Smith the untested goalkeeper play well at this level in these situations?’ became the story of the next four days as everybody clamored to get the answer from the player herself. The coach stepped in and deflected as much of the media craze as she could and the veteran players said all the right things and supported their young keeper all the way. Ashlyn’s smackdown of Lalas had gone viral and neither she nor Ali were sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing yet. Ashlyn certainly didn’t want to be known as the commentator who bitched out her fellow commentators and, in the eyes of some, that is exactly what she was. But Lalas had a habit of saying big dumb things like that and because he said them in such a confident way people let him get away with it all the time. Everybody who was tired of his big mouth loved that somebody had finally called bullshit on him. The fact that Ashlyn had done it so eloquently and passionately, but still without really dragging him too much, completely impressed a whole other section of the soccer-loving world. After a couple of days of back and forth on every social media platform there was, the overall feeling about it was that Ashlyn was right to defend the player. And it didn’t go unnoticed that she had defended her passionately, even though that very same player was probably going to be taking her starting position next season if not sooner. And no-one was surprised that another big dumb man had opened his mouth in the women’s soccer world and made an ass of himself. Ashlyn had won a battle for every women’s soccer fan in the world and they were all appreciative.

What people didn’t know was that Abby Smith called Ashlyn after she saw the clip on Twitter and tearfully thanked her. The younger player knew she owed much of her success to the older keeper and wasn’t about to forget it. Bob Costas did a big sit-down interview with a few of the USWNT players in the build-up to the Semi-final game and Abby Smith was one of them. When he asked her about the controversy and about the comments, she went out of her way to praise Ashlyn and
give her all the credit she could. She talked about what a blessing it was to be able to learn from her and train with her and be around her every day.

“I’ve never been around a more competitive person in my entire life” she chuckled, as did Tobin Heath and Rose Lavelle who were both part of the interview. “She brings it every day in every single training no matter what. There’s no way I’d be playing as well as I am today if I hadn’t been playing with her for the past four and a half years. No doubt in my mind at all. And she’s supportive at the same time. That’s what makes her so special. She doesn’t have to help me. We’re fighting for the starting spot on our club team and the way she’s helped me...she’s just a really great person and I’m lucky to have her in my corner.”

And then when Ashlyn was on the air before they broadcast the Semi-final against China they got Abby Smith on the big screen behind them via satellite for a little interview. The USWNT had already won the game, Tokyo was 13 hours ahead of the east coast of the US so they were airing all the games in prime time the night after they happened. It was a little anticlimactic, especially because all of the really devoted fans had watched the game live in the wee hours of the morning, but it was the best they could do. Worst case, they brought the game to a wider audience even though most of the world already knew the result.

At the end of the interview with Abby Smith, who had played well in the game, she gave Ashlyn a little shout out before they cut the satellite feed.

“That one was for you Keep!” she beamed at her teammate and mentor.

Anybody paying attention could see how much her words had moved Ashlyn, despite her ability to keep it together. She fidgeted in her chair a little bit, smiled sincerely at the big screen and cleared her throat to steady herself.

“Thanks Abs, I appreciate it. Now go get the next one for yourself kiddo.”

There were four days off between the Quarterfinal and the Semi-Final game against China. Everybody on the broadcast team had gone home for a break, including Ashlyn and her wife and son. They were halfway through the month of August and neither Ali nor Ashlyn could figure out where the hell the summer had gone. They spent the weekend at the big old house with Deb and Mike Christopher before he flew back to Miami. Ali wanted to make sure to spend as much time as possible with Sydney before her school year started up again so the coach brought Cash and Boss up to Gloucester almost every other day during those last two weeks of the month. And then Meg was coming up for her annual summer visit that Wednesday. They were trying something different this year. Meg had been asking to stay longer for the past two years so they were extending her stay to ten days this time. There had only been one off-week for the NWSL back in June and Meg couldn’t come up to Gloucester then. And Ashlyn had been busy for the first two weeks of August with the Olympic coverage so the settled on the last full week of August and half of the week before. Meg was eight years old and no longer a baby. She loved being at the big old house with the dogs and Ali and Drew even if Ashlyn had to be away for a road game or to fly one last time to Stamford, CT for the gold medal match of the Olympics.

The USWNT played Canada in one of the toughest matches in their long and storied history of competing against each other. The winner won the gold medal and the loser the silver medal. In the 2016 Olympics Canada had won the bronze medal and the US had flopped. That result still burned bitterly in the stomachs of many of the USWNT players. They were also still ticked off about finishing second in the World Cup last year too. The USWNT was motivated and hungry and they were just a little bit scrappier than the Canadians as they fought their way to the gold medal, beating them 3-2. Christen Press was the hero, putting away the game-winner in the 88th minute.
with a beautiful display of technical skill right at the top of the box. The game was played Friday, August 21st at 8pm in Tokyo. Ali decided to throw a sleepover Olympics slumber party for anyone who was interested so they could roll out of bed and watch the game live at 7am their time. Sydney and Cash and Whitney slept over, and Meg and Deb were already there. Niki and Molly got up early and brought Noah and Evan with them to celebrate the Olympics and enjoy the gold medal match with other soccer lovers.

Ashlyn had gone to Stamford the night before because she would be spending the whole day and evening in the studio wrapping up the women’s soccer tournament and as excited as she was to be there, she still wished she could have been at the big old house for the sleepover and party. The keeper breathed a sigh of relief when the USWNT won the gold medal because she had brashly predicted it on air when she was rebutting Alexi Lalas’ stupid comment about Abby Smith. Ashlyn hadn’t realized how tense she had been about the game until they had won it and she was officially off the hook. As they finished up their live coverage in the morning Ashlyn got a call on her cellphone from Abby, thanking her from the locker room in the middle of their champagne celebration. It was a phone call the blonde would never forget.

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Eight-year old Meg was an absolute sweetheart. She was old enough to do most things herself and smart enough to follow the rules and stay out of trouble. She was still a human kid and she had a few moments every day where she was bratty or misbehaved. But all you had to do was remind her of the rule or tell her what the consequences would be if she repeated the bad behavior and she stopped almost immediately. She was smart and funny and easy to be around. The weekend after the gold medal game was the only one she and Ashlyn would be able to share and they spent almost the entirety of both days at the beach and in the water. They were both happy as clams about it. Ali and Deb brought Drew down for parts of each day and it was easily one of the best weekends all year. Meg was very excited to get to go to the Breakers first game back after the Olympics break. It was Wednesday night at 8pm so it was a really late night for the youngster as she watched Ashlyn lead the Breakers over Sky Blue for another three points. She was a good soccer player and Ashlyn brought her onto the field for pre-game warm-ups and kicked the ball around with her when she had completed her own warm-ups. Meg walked out with the blonde again, just as she had done last year, and paid close attention to every bit of the game. She did great, fighting off her sleepiness until the truck ride home and then falling fast asleep as soon as her butt hit the seat.

The trick that visit had been getting her to sleep in a room other than the nursery. Ali and Ashlyn had thought a lot about it and they decided to move the other twin bed back up from the basement and put it into Whitney’s old room. They were trying to think ahead to baby #2 as well, and that was the room that Drew was going to get moved to once they had another baby. It made sense to get it started with the biggest kid in the family, sweet Meg. She took to it right away and Ali thought it was because she was used to the twin bed and it felt more normal to her. Ashlyn thought that was part of it, but she knew the little girl loved the fact that the room had been Whitney’s before and took some comfort from that.

For Ali and Ashlyn’s third wedding anniversary, the night before the Sky Blue game, they stayed home and Deb and Meg made their dinner and waited on them as if they were at a fancy restaurant. It had been Meg’s idea and she got it when she asked Ashlyn about her first date with Ali. They told her the G-rated story about how Ashlyn’s shoulder therapy had been really intense and painful and she was really tired from the workouts and that they decided to just have dinner at home instead of going out for their first date. Ali told the little girl about how beautifully the keeper had decorated the kitchen and how romantic it had been dancing with her there after they had eaten their dinner. Meg went right to Deb to see if she would help her. Of course Deb thought it was the
sweetest idea she had ever heard and dove right in. It had been her responsibility to make sure the couple didn’t make other plans for dinner that night.

As each woman came home that day, Ashlyn in the late afternoon after training and Ali earlier, after her morning in the office, they had been told they were not allowed to be anywhere near the kitchen. Then they were told that dinner would be served promptly at 6pm and to look presentable.

“Do you know what’s going on?” Ashlyn asked her wife as she stepped out of the shower after being sent up the front stairs when she got home from training.

“I have no idea, but I can’t decide which one of them is cuter, Meg or my mom” she chuckled as she sat on the floor of the bathroom playing with Drew. He loved to watch the water run down the glass walls of the shower whenever someone was in there. “Obviously they’re doing something for our anniversary and I’m going to guess dinner.”

“Oh, is it our anniversary today?” the keeper teased as she dried herself off, stopping to shake her hair out and spray her son and wife with droplets of water, making him giggle.

“Ha ha, very funny” Ali replied and enjoyed the view of her beautiful, naked and wet wife in front of her.

They had agreed to wait and celebrate after Meg had gone home. Neither of them felt like it was fair to ask Deb to watch Drew and Meg while they went out to dinner, no matter how local and fast they made it. They had spent some time early that morning celebrating in their own naked way and were more than content with that. When it was 6pm they walked down the front stairs with Drew, all three of them dressed up a little bit. Not fancy formal, but Ali wore a pretty skirt with a nice blouse, Ashlyn wore a pair of dress pants and a crisp button down shirt, and Drew wore a cute t-shirt with the image of a neck tie on the front of it. They were adorable. Meg greeted them in the mudroom with a white apron on and a large white dishtowel draped over her arm like a formal waiter.

“Your table is ready” she said smoothly and led them to the small kitchen table in front of the big, double-sided fireplace.

“Oh, it’s so beautiful in here” Ali enthused with a big smile. “I love it.”

“Does it remind you of any other time, maybe?” Deb asked suggestively and nodded her head eagerly when Meg wasn’t looking at her.

“This reminds me of our first date” Ashlyn said, picking up the hint from her mother-in-law.

The table had a white table cloth on it with a vase of flowers and a lit candle in the middle of it. It really did look beautiful. Drew’s highchair was in its’ familiar spot between the two chairs and Ashlyn settled him into it and strapped him in, pulling out Ali’s chair for her while she was at it. Meg stood there acting out the part very well.

“What would you care for a drink?”

They went through the steps with her as Deb brought over Drew’s dinner for them so they could start feeding him while they played along with Meg. She carefully carried over a glass of wine for Ali and a glass of water for Ashlyn. Then she carried their salads, one at a time of course, followed by their dinners. Ashlyn had helped them out by plugging her phone into the portable speakers and playing the current version of that romantic dinner playlist she had used five years ago. Ali remembered that they had sat in the opposite seats so they got up and switched halfway through the
meal which Meg thought was silly and funny. When Meg served them their dinner, Ali asked her mom if she would take a picture of them with their awesome waitress and that photograph instantly became another of their favorites. When it was time for dessert she brought them over a dish of ice cream for each of them and grinned when Ashlyn asked if she could sit with them and eat some ice cream too since they were her last table of the night and her work was mostly done. Meg looked at Deb who nodded and smiled, scooping out two more dishes of ice cream and joining the group as well.

Ali and Ashlyn had done the big fancy dinner out for their anniversary before as well as the more casual dinner out but this adorable dinner recreation of their first date was the best one ever. When they finished their ice cream they got up to help clean up and move on to the rest of the evening. Drew squawked along happily too until the third song started. Ali picked her fussy son up, he was teething again that week, and danced with him while Ashlyn scooped up Meg and danced with her.

“Come on mom” Ali called to her mother who was at the sink and then sashayed over to her and added her to her dance with Drew so they were all moving to the music in the kitchen that happy evening.

Persey and Fred couldn’t figure out what this new game was but they paced around all the legs as they tried to work it out. Later that night after they had put Drew to bed, put Meg to bed and cleaned up the kitchen, they sat in the living room with Deb chuckling about what a lovely evening it had been.

“It was all her idea” Deb confessed with an impressed shake of her head. “She’s such a sweet kid. And so creative.”

“Thanks for helping her and making us that yummy dinner Deb” the blonde replied sincerely. “That was really sweet of you.”

When they finally got into bed and snuggled up together to go to sleep, Ali’s thoughts went to Meg and their family.

“I know it’ll be different, but it’s fun having two kids with you” she leaned up and kissed her wife’s cheek as she curled into her left side as usual.

“Right?” Ashlyn replied enthusiastically. “I’ve been thinking that this whole visit. And you’re right, it will be totally different with two really little ones, but eventually Drew will be eight...”

“You shut your mouth” Ali chastised with mock horror on her face.

“Unless you know some kind of magic that keeps kids from growing...”

“Seriously Ash, you’re breaking my heart. I don’t want to talk about him growing up right now.”

They were quiet for a few minutes as they snuggled and caressed each other’s soft arms and shoulders. Both their minds were processing different thoughts and churning away in the dark as they waited for sleep to come.

“You know, I think we should switch to IUI next month. But I know it’s not my body so...”

“I was thinking the same thing” Ali agreed quickly.

“Really?”
“Yep. I’m done messing around with IVI. Just because it worked last time doesn’t mean it’s going to work this time. I was just waiting for this month to quiet down before I talked about it with you” the brunette added with a squeeze of Ashlyn’s waist.

They had been trying to get pregnant the same way they had two years ago, through Intravaginal Insemination. They had started in June and August was the third month it hadn’t worked. Intrauterine Insemination, IUI, was supposed to be much more effective because you inserted the sperm right into the uterus, significantly cutting down the swim time required to get to the egg. IUI had to be done at the fertility clinic but it wasn’t much different than the IVI method they had done themselves at home the first time. The doctor had to insert the sperm through a catheter that passed through the cervix and went right into the uterus. They had been using the same donor as last time and Ali didn’t have any fertility issues so there was no reason the IVI shouldn’t have worked. And there was no reason the IUI wouldn’t work either. It was just fate and the odds. It was hard not to be impatient though, each of the three times they had done the IVI and not gotten pregnant was sad and stressful for both Ashlyn and Ali. They did exactly what had worked for them when they conceived Drew. Ali kept a meticulous ovulation chart and had gotten really good at recognizing when she would be ovulating. Deb and Whitney both knew what was going on and tried to be as supportive as possible. Ali finally had to tell her mother to stop asking her about her cervical mucus every morning. Deb knew she was going overboard but she found it hard to stop herself. She was so excited to have another grandbaby. The couple had decided that they would try three rounds of IUI and hope for the best. If Ali wasn’t pregnant by December then they would start using the expensive fertility drugs with the IUI to try and increase their chances.

“Oh, so IUI next time for sure” Ashlyn patted her wife’s thigh as it rested across her hips.

“I like it” Ali agreed and yawned. “And start praying to Gram for help again. We need it.”

With the end of summer came the departure of both Meg and Deb. And Sydney started teaching and coaching again and the big old house just felt empty without all of those loved ones filling it up. Sydney and Cash still came up on the weekends to enjoy the beautiful September weather at the beach, but it was a seasonal adjustment that Ali just never quite got used to.

Koty started his new college just after Labor Day with millions of other students in the Boston area. He had been accepted by Tufts University and, after transferring his credits over from BC, would be starting the second half of his junior year that month. If he continued doing well, he would graduate in January of 2022 after completing his senior year there as well. Tufts wasn’t right in Boston. It was located just outside of it, in Medford and Somerville, MA. It was a very good school and mostly known for being a science and research university. Before rehab, Koty hadn’t focused much on what he wanted to do with his life after college but the time he had taken off that year had allowed him time to think about all of those things. His rehab had gone very well and he genuinely seemed to want to make changes in his life. He had spent a lot of time talking with both Kyle and Ali that year and they had both helped him work through a lot of issues. Koty had enrolled in Tufts’ college of Engineering and was going to become a structural engineer. He had always been good at math and he had always liked construction projects so it seemed like a very good fit. His father was a genius mechanical engineer so it was no mystery where he got his head for numbers and engineering from. When he told his family what his plans were they were all very supportive.

Ali recalled a younger Koty, around 14 years old because it was right when Ken and Vicki started getting serious, being fascinated with the blueprints that she was working with for her sales job. She had been visiting her father and Vicki and both boys were there when Ali got an urgent phone
call from one of her builder customers. She had gone out to her truck and opened the set of plans on the tailgate so she could talk through the problem and find a solution. Koty had been outside shooting baskets and by the time she was done with her twenty-minute conversation he had moved all the way over to the tailgate where he watched and listened intently. She had been surprised to find him so close when she ended the phone call but was happy to answer the few questions he asked her about the plans and what she did. The other nice thing about Tufts was that it was a Division III school so Koty not only made the soccer team, but became a valuable starter and team leader. Everybody was happy for the young man and wished him success as he learned how to live his life better than he had in the past.

Tanner went back down to Providence for his sophomore year with a summer full of experience training with both Ken and Ali and sometimes Sydney too. He had more confidence than ever before and he made sure to thank the brunette for investing so much time in him. She made him promise to keep in touch with her as the season progressed. She wasn’t going anywhere and she would always help him in any way she could. All he had to do was reach out. Ken and Sydney were both thrilled to get their girl back on the pitch, in whatever capacity they could. They didn’t talk about it but the two soccer coaches exchanged more than a few meaningful looks as they watched Ali repeatedly take the soccer ball away from Tanner as he tried to dribble past her.

And as Ali worked with Mattie to try and reconcile her feelings about the beautiful game, she realized that she had some unfinished business to take care of from her time with Sarah. The therapist talked about getting closure and coming to terms with expectations, both those fulfilled as well as dashed. Ali had always planned to talk with Sarah about their time together and her past with Emily but there had never seemed a good time to do it. Sarah and Erin were engaged to be married the following year and the brunette could not have been happier for her ex. And it wasn’t the happiness just because she was relieved not to feel guilty about hurting Sarah either. As Ali and Ashlyn had begun to socialize with Sarah and Erin more often, the past between them got farther and farther away. When Ashlyn had spent enough time around both Sarah and Erin to understand that theirs was a real, committed relationship she stopped feeling awkward about having Sarah around again. Nobody knew better than Ashlyn how strong Ali’s pull could be and part of her always suspected Sarah was just trying to stay close to the brunette in the hopes of some kind of trouble between she and Ashlyn. The keeper was very happy that she had never confessed any of those thoughts or concerns to anyone except Whitney.

“Hey you” Ali stood up and hugged Sarah hello before sitting back down at the table in the Café restaurant of the Gardner museum.

“Hi, sorry I’m late” the architect apologized as she took her seat across the small table.

Ali had been surprised when Sarah suggested meeting at the Gardner. The place was full of so many memories and feelings about Ashlyn that it felt odd to meet her ex there at first.

“We don’t have to meet there” Sarah paused awkwardly as they made plans over the phone two weeks earlier. “I know it’s special to you and I just thought it would be nice. Plus, I’m working on a project a few blocks away so it’s also really convenient” she chuckled at her own admission. “Is it too special? Are you only allowed to go there with Ashlyn now?” she teased.

“No, God, you make me sound like some weirdo with an obsession for a museum or something...” Ali started to defend herself weakly.

“Well, you said it, not me” Sarah laughed and was relieved when the brunette joined her.

They met on a weekday afternoon in early September, just after the lunch rush had buzzed through the café and hustled back to work again. They ate and talked and laughed like old friends and Ali
was happy that they had made the effort to stay close. After they had been ‘friends’ for almost a year Sarah admitted to the brunette that she had never been a big fan of staying friends with her exes and had never had any success doing it before. They had talked about it then and both agreed it was worth the effort as long as Ashlyn and Erin were both on board. Once Sarah and Erin became season ticket holders for the Breakers in 2018 they hadn’t looked back. The couple came out to celebrate the victories with the team and that was that. Their most recent socializing, aside from Breakers games, had been New Year’s Eve and both couples had enjoyed the night a lot. They hadn’t planned to ring in the New Year together but had ended up at the same club and celebrated with Niki and Molly as well.

After they finished catching up on each other’s lives as they ate their lunch, they strolled into the beautiful courtyard in the mansion. They spent the next half hour walking through the museum and talking some more.

“So, are you going to tell me whatever it is that you need to tell me or what?” Sarah finally asked as they sat in the Spanish Cloister where ‘El Jaleo’ hung.

Her voice wasn’t harsh or even impatient. It was soft and kind and it gave Ali the strength to open her mouth as they sat side by side on the same bench from which Ashlyn had first sketched Ali.

“Yeah, so I’ve been wanting to tell you this for a while now” she paused. “Three and a half years actually” she grinned sheepishly at the architect and then glanced down at her hands in her lap.

“Ok, well I’d love to hear it Al” Sarah replied with an encouraging smile. “Whatever’s making you so nervous...you don’t have to be. I won’t judge you. We’ve come a long way and I’m glad we’re friends. Nothing’s going to change that. Ok?”


She spent the next forty minutes telling Sarah about her relationship with Emily, not delving quite as deeply into it as she had when she told Ashlyn the story. She kept going even when the architect’s face registered shock or surprise or anger. Ali knew she had to get it out because she wasn’t going to be able to start again if she stopped. She questioned why she was even doing this again in one of her moments of panic. Why was she revealing her deepest darkest secret to a woman she hadn’t loved enough to call ‘girlfriend’?

“Jesus Ali” Sarah said softly when the brunette had stopped talking. “What an awful way to start your young lesbian life. I’m so sorry all of that happened to you” she leaned over and gave her a hug, rubbing Ali’s back as she held her for almost a full minute.

“I don’t tell people that story” she explained quietly, lifting her eyes to meet the deep blue ones next to her, “so I’d appreciate it if you kept it to yourself.”

“Of course...”

“I mean, you can tell Erin if you need to, but just, try to make sure she knows it’s really private. Please.”

“What? You don’t want her to make some sort of joke about it at the next Breakers game?” she chuckled and patted Ali’s knee twice. “I’ll only tell her if I need to and if I do I’ll make sure she doesn’t tell anybody else. I promise Al.”

“Thank you.”

They sat there in the cool cloister for several minutes without saying anything else. Ali looked past
the architect to gaze down at her favorite painting and smiled. She seemed to draw strength from it the longer she looked at it.

“So, why did you tell me that?” Sarah finally asked, cocking her head to look at the brunette. “I mean, aside from pointing out the glaring differences between the way Emily treated you and the way I treated you when we were together” she paused. “What is it you’re trying to tell me?”

Ali looked down at the tile floor beneath her feet and took a couple of deep breaths as she organized her thoughts. She hadn’t told her about Mattie or her therapy or the letter she wrote to Emily to help her close that chapter of her life. She glanced at Sarah and then gave her a small grin before meeting her eyes.

“You may not think it’s important now” she started, her voice surprisingly clear for all the emotion it carried in it, “but I really want you to know how much you did for me when we were together. You helped me more than you could ever imagine Sarah. I...you...” she took a shaky breath and felt her face blush a little, “you fixed me. You took all the broken pieces that were left over and you helped me put them back together. And you didn’t even know you were doing it.”

Sarah put her hand back on Ali’s knee and squeezed it, leaving it there as the brunette continued to talk.

“I owe you so much and there’s no way to repay you. All I can do is tell you how important you were to me then and how thankful I am for you now.” Ali shook her head as tears started to form in the corners of her eyes. She looked down quickly and one tear dropped to the floor between her legs. She looked up at the architect again and took another breath. “There’s no way I’d be with Ashlyn now if you hadn’t helped me first Sarah. I just needed you to know that...and to say thank you. I owe you everything.”

They hugged for another minute and then Ali sat back, not wanting to freak the woman out any more than she probably already had. Sarah took a couple of minutes and thought about everything her ex had just told her. It was a hell of a lot to take in and process.

“Alli, I appreciate you saying that, I really do, but I didn’t do anything you wouldn’t have done, or any half-decent person wouldn’t have done” she shrugged her shoulders. “I’m glad our relationship helped you and healed you, but you’re the reason you got better and stronger. Not me.” She thought for another minute. “A lot of things make more sense to me now, I’ll admit that” she chuckled softly. “The hardest thing for me to accept about us was that you didn’t understand the depth of your feelings for Ashlyn. I often wondered why you even bothered with me in the first place when it was so obvious that you loved her. And now I think I understand. You really didn’t know. You weren’t staying with me as some sort of weird torture fantasy” she chuckled again. “You were just doing the best you could in a tough situation.”

“God Sarah, you deserved so much better...I’ll regret that for as long as I live.”

“Look, I’m not going to sit here and try to make you feel better about how things ended with us. You still feel guilty and that’s on you. I’m over it and I have been for a long time. But if I look back at it, you tried to break up with me a few times and just couldn’t quite do it. I knew you had feelings for Ashlyn and I chose to continue the relationship anyway. Now that I know where you were coming from and what you had been through, it all makes a lot more sense to me. Thank you for sharing it with me Ali. Really, it was brave and it means a lot that you would trust me enough to tell me all of that. Thank you.”

“Well now we have to stay friends for life, or else I have to kill you. Your choice” Ali quipped after another minute’s pause to let everything settle down.
“Easiest choice ever” Sarah laughed as they hugged again.
The Breakers had four games in September with a FIFA off-week right in the middle of them. The USWNT players took their time coming back to the league after their Gold Medal winning Olympics experience. They took the last week of August off to deal with the jetlag from flying home from Tokyo and to get some rest after the grueling schedule they had played during the games. Ashlyn started the two games the Breakers played that last week of August and knew there was going to be a change coming when Abby Smith returned to the team. There was no way the USWNT goalkeeper who had just helped the team win a gold medal in the Olympics was going to sit on the bench two of out three games. She deserved to start, but so did Ashlyn. The fans wanted to see their Olympic heroines on the pitch in the NWSL games and couldn’t wait for the September games to start so that would happen. Boston fans were torn and truly struggling with the situation. They were so loyal to Ashlyn because she had always gone above and beyond for the fans. Unless she was injured, she was always the last one out there signing autographs, even at most of the away games. She was just wonderful and the fans really adored her. But they were excited about Abby Smith too, and nobody could blame them. She was talented and this was her moment in the spotlight.

The Breakers were still at the top of the table and pushing hard to win the Supporter’s Shield for the best record and most points during the regular season. Ashlyn started the home game against Atlanta the first Saturday of September. Abby started the next game, an away game in Houston that also happened to be the Lifetime TV Game of the Week. After the week off, Ashlyn started the away game in Vancouver and then Abby got the home game against Chicago – again, the Game of the Week on Lifetime TV. They were 16-2-5 with a total of 53 points for the year so far with three games left to finish out the season. Ashlyn had tried to be mature and understanding of the situation with Abby, but she was crushed when the coach gave her Chicago start to Abby. He knew it wasn’t fair or right but he was getting pressure from US Soccer, who still supported and funded a big part of the league, to start Abby Smith in more games. They wanted him to make her the defacto starter and he had flat out refused. He finally agreed to alternate them for the rest of the season but that was all he would commit to. The team was uneasy about the keeper situation. Everybody liked Abby and knew she was a good keeper, but this was Ashlyn and Whitney’s team. Everybody knew that. Whitney was retiring and now they were replacing Ashlyn too? It had bad news written all over it but there was nothing to be done except try to win their last three games of the season and secure the supporters shield, then win their playoff game and then, hopefully the championship game after that.

The only thing that September that was able to take Ashlyn’s mind off of her changing role on the team was the IUI treatment scheduled for the next time Ali was about to ovulate. As luck would have it, or as Gram worked her magic, Ali’s ovulation chart told them that they needed to go to the fertility clinic and get the IUI treatment done on Monday 9-14-17 which was during the FIFA off-week in the middle of the month. Partly out of superstition and partly because it made logical sense, Ali and Ashlyn formulated a plan to help ensure that they were going to get pregnant that time. When it had worked for Drew they had given Ali an orgasm, then injected the sperm, then given Ali another orgasm just to make sure they had given the sperm the very best chance of being welcomed into the brunette’s vagina.

“But they’re not getting injected into my vagina this time so it’s not such a big deal” Ali argued her point.

“Well, maybe the second orgasm isn’t as necessary then” Ashlyn considered. “But the first one is a must, don’t you think?”
They were reviewing everything they had learned about what went on inside Ali’s body, or any woman’s body, during an orgasm and how it was designed to encourage conception. It was the first week of September and Ashlyn had stopped at Ali’s office between trainings to eat lunch with her wife. They were sitting on the leather sofa in her office and eating big, healthy salads with grilled chicken on them that the keeper had picked up on her way over.

“Yeah, I do. It’s just, I’m not sure how important any of it is because they’re getting injected into my uterus so the cervix dropping down and opening up doesn’t matter because the sperm are already past it. Right?”

Frustrated, Ashlyn fell back on the reason she would never give in to her wife on this argument.

“We’re doing it anyway. It worked last time and we’re doing it.”

Ashlyn had been prepared to ask for either the morning or the afternoon training session off on whatever day they made the appointment for, again, depending on Ali’s ovulation calculation. But because it was the off week she didn’t have to worry about that. She considered the timing to be a very good sign. The plan was to have sex at home and then race to the fertility clinic for Ali’s appointment. Then, after the doctor injected the sperm, Ashlyn would give her wife another orgasm in the treatment room. After they injected, the doctor and other staff always left you alone for the thirty minutes you were supposed to lie still. They didn’t officially tell you to get busy with your husband or wife, but they made a point to tell you that they were leaving the room for thirty minutes so you could have your privacy. As the day got closer they tweaked their plan some more.

“Because I think it’ll take too long to drive there, wait for them to call your name, get into the room and get changed, then wait for the doctor to come in and talk to us and then wait for him to do the injection. It’s just too fucking long Al.”

Ashlyn was passionately advocating for giving Ali an orgasm in the car in the parking lot of the fertility clinic instead of back at home. It was a rainy Sunday afternoon, the day before their appointment, and they had just put Drew down for his nap. They talked as they went down the front stairs and settled on the couch in the living room.

“Hi, have we met?” Ali chuckled and waved at her wife. “What makes you think I’m going to be able to have an orgasm in public when I’ll already be nervous as hell to begin with?” she stretched out on the couch, propped up on a couple of pillows in the corner of the ‘L’ bend.

Ashlyn crawled up the length of the couch after her and sat on the brunette’s lap, straddling her hips and wiggling her long fingers in front of her beautiful face.

“My magic fingers” she teased with mischief in her eyes and a goofy grin on her face. “They’ve never failed me yet.”

“You’re a dork” Ali laughed and then beamed up at her gorgeous wife. “I love you.”

“You love my magic fingers too” the keeper wagged her eyebrows and kept wiggling her fingers.

She finally stopped moving them once she put them firmly on her wife’s breasts. She tilted her head a bit to the side and smiled softly at the brunette below her.

“What’s the matter babe? You look sad.” Ali rubbed her hands up and down her keeper’s thighs.

“I just realized I’m going to miss these beauties again” Ashlyn said softly and started to gently caress Ali’s breasts through her t-shirt and bra. “I just got them back...”
“Aww, it has been a nice couple of months without them being sore all the damned time” Ali agreed as her heart melted at how sad Ashlyn was about it. “Maybe you’d better just give them some attention right now.”

She reached behind her to undo her bra, letting Ashlyn pull it off of her arms through the sleeves of her t-shirt. Ali settled back against the couch and pulled her t-shirt up under her chin, watching her wife’s face soften and then work itself into a smile.

“You’re so beautiful Al” she grinned at the brunette appreciatively. “And these babies here, well, let me just show you how much I love them...” she smirked and brought her lips down to help her fingers work on Ali’s small and perfect breasts with a satisfied hum.

The next day Ali’s appointment went well. They had sex at home and then raced to the fertility clinic for the IUI injection. After the doctor and staff left the treatment room, saying, as always, that they would be back in a half an hour, Ashlyn wagged her eyebrows at her wife.

“What do you think?” she asked with an adorable grin on her face as she leaned down to kiss Ali’s cheek.

The brunette was lying flat on her back with her knees bent up and her feet flat on the exam table. She had a hopeful look on her pretty face and Ashlyn took a minute to appreciate how beautiful she looked. Only Ali Krieger could manage to look gorgeous in a yellow, paper hospital gown.

“I love you Ash. And I want to make a baby” she moved her hands over her stomach and smiled at her keeper.

“So...” Ashlyn wasn’t sure if that meant she was going to give her an orgasm or not.

“Come kiss me and play with my boobs while I take care of my clit” Ali said as seductively as she could in the sterile environment.

“Oooh, yes ma’am” her face lit up as she moved closer to Ali’s head and chest.

Ashlyn brought their lips together in a sweet kiss that slowly turned into more as their tongues started to dance. She moved her hands under the paper gown, trying to ignore the crinkling of the stiff paper garment, and began to massage Ali’s breasts and palm her nipples.

“Mmmm, yeah babe.”

Ali had her eyes shut, concentrating hard to forget where they were and think about the fun and carefree sex they had had the afternoon before on the living room couch. She moved her hand to her clit, paper gown wrinkling noisily again, and started to rub it slowly. She felt Ashlyn’s mouth moving down her jaw and over to her neck as she increased the pace and pressure on her breasts.

“Fuck, you feel so good in my hands baby” the keeper purred into her ear and then licked it before nibbling on the earlobe some more.

That’s what she needed, her keeper in her ear and at her breasts and running all through her mind and body as she continued to rub her own clit.

“Oh, Ash...” Ali moaned as she felt the beginnings of a small orgasm. “Yes. Mmmm...yes...”

Ashlyn slid her lips down her throat and started to suck on her pulse point as she moved her hand down to the sweet spot near her wife’s left hip. She ran her fingers across it a few times, softly grazing the surface and making Ali moan and quicken her pace. She traced a circle around the area
and then dragged her short nails across it, scratching lightly at the wave tattoo as she sucked on a new spot on her neck.

“You’re gorgeous baby and I can’t wait to feel you come. So sexy...mmmmmm...I could eat you up right now...”

Ali rubbed faster and tangled her free hand in Ashlyn’s blonde hair, tugging it as the small orgasm hit and made her shake on the table. Just like previous times, Ashlyn tried to keep her wife’s hips as still as possible while she came.

“Fuck Ash...fuck...” she moaned as she came quietly and started panting to catch her breath.

“I love you honey. And I hope we just made a baby” Ashlyn cooed into her ear, her voice full of emotion and love.

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“Can you tell me why you’re so anxious Ali? You seem...particularly aggravated this afternoon.”

Mattie’s kind voice finally broke through the cloud of frustration that surrounded the brunette’s being as she sat in the therapist’s office towards the end of that week. Ashlyn and Ali were enduring another ‘Two-Week Wait’ and it was killing them both. It was wonderful news, really. The fact that Ali hadn’t gotten her period in the days after the IUI injection was a really good sign that it had worked. The last three times they had tried getting pregnant with the IVI treatment at home, her period had come a few days afterwards and they knew it hadn’t worked. But the agony of waiting for two whole weeks before they could go back to the fertility clinic and have the tests done to confirm the pregnancy was almost unbearable. As desperately as they had wanted to be pregnant with Drew, the want this time around was ten times stronger. Ali had a therapy appointment scheduled with Mattie for Friday that week and she didn’t want to change it. She had been seeing her monthly. She wanted to get past her soccer problem before she became pregnant and all of those hormones made her feel extra emotional again.

“I’m sorry Mattie” the brunette apologized, lifting her eyes and trying to smile. “It’s just bad timing. We’re in the middle of our two-week wait to find out if I’m pregnant or not...”

“Oh well that’s exciting!” the therapist enthused. “It’s a good sign that you’re even in this position right? If it hadn’t worked you wouldn’t be waiting for official word. Have I got that right?”

“Yes” Ali chuckled, moved by the kind woman’s enthusiasm. “You’re right. But that stress you’re probably feeling as it pours off of my body...that’s what it’s from.”

They talked some more about the pregnancy attempt and some concerns the brunette had about being pregnant again and other aspects of being a mom to two children, hopefully. Towards the end of that part of the discussion Mattie brought something to Ali’s attention, challenging her, as she so often did, to recognize part of her own behavior.

“There’s something else causing all of the stress I’m sensing from you. Do you know what it is?”

Ali chewed her bottom lip for a minute as she thought about it.

“It’s ok if you don’t know, but before you leave today I want to make sure we talk about it because I think it’s important...”

“I wanted this to be fixed before I got pregnant again and I’m panicking that we’re not making much progress” Ali answered evenly, eyes on her lap.
Mattie chuckled softly. “Yes. I’ve noticed it the last two times we’ve met and I think the extra pressure you’re putting on yourself is making it harder for you to make progress.”

It was Ali’s turn to chuckle. As her therapist’s words sunk in, she couldn’t help but think about the handful of times she had said the exact same thing to Ashlyn over the past five years or so. The first example that popped into her head was when the blonde put all the pressure on herself to have some magnificent portrait of Grandma Lilian completed by the time she threw Ali’s big birthday party at the house and asked her to move in.

“What’s got you amused now?”

“Oh nothing” the brunette smiled shyly as she met Mattie’s eyes. “It’s just that I tell Ashlyn that sometimes and I can’t believe I’m doing the same thing with this.”

“Well, it’s a pretty basic human response and we all do it so don’t beat yourself up. Just try and be aware of it so you can stop yourself from doing it next time.” She smiled at the brunette. “And, although it may not feel like it to you or be on your time schedule, we are making good progress Ali.”

The brunette looked up at the therapist with confusion on her face as she tugged at her fingers. She tried to think of what Mattie could be talking about because it didn’t feel like she had moved more than an inch towards making peace with soccer.

“I’m glad you think so” Ali said sullenly, not caring if she sounded like a brat at that moment.

“How long have we been working on this?” Mattie asked softly, tilting her head to the side a little bit and re-crossing her legs as she studied her client.

“Umm...July of last year” she replied, pausing to think back and get the answer correct. “But I didn’t get really serious about it until January this year.”

“We met once a month, starting in July, and you told me all about growing up playing soccer and loving soccer and wanting to be a professional soccer player and all of the wonderful things about soccer. We spent six sessions talking about that. Do you remember?”

“Yes. But...”

“Just give me a minute here” Mattie patted the air in front of her, telling Ali to relax. “And then in January when you got ‘serious about it’, to use your words, you told me all about the anger and frustration and sadness and disappointment you felt after soccer had been taken away from you. We spent three sessions talking about that.”

She stopped talking and looked at the brunette who was scrunching up her face as she tried to understand where the therapist was going with her summary.

“Oh, so we spent twice as long talking about the good things as we did the bad things. Is that the point?” Ali asked after another couple of minutes, sitting back against the comfortable couch and sighing in frustration.

“I can see you’re frustrated today so I’m going to do some of the work for you, just this once” Mattie said with the tiniest bite in her voice. She hated when her clients took the lazy way out. But she knew that wasn’t usually what Ali did so she was giving her a pass on this one. “For the past five sessions what have we talked about, not counting today?”

“Lots of things, my training with Tanner and my Dad, the spring soccer with Syd, the soccer camps
She rattled off several other non-soccer things as well but Mattie came back to those soccer events once the brunette had finished.

“Good. So when you worked with Ashlyn at her camp almost three years ago, do you remember what happened?”

Ali sighed again but felt bad because it wasn’t Mattie’s fault that she was so agitated that day. She should have just rescheduled her appointment.

“I did pretty good with the little kids but as soon as I started working with the older kids I shut down” she replied like a sad robot, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees and hands fidgeting.

“Ashlyn agreed” the therapist reminded her. “She said it looked like you had just completely zoned out and were just going through the motions.”

Ali rubbed her face with both hands and sighed again. She felt almost like a toddler about to have a tantrum.

“This year, just last month I believe, you worked with Ashlyn at one of her day-long camps, right?”

“Yes” the brunette replied and looked at Mattie expectantly.

“And how did that go again?”

“It was fine. I felt much better, but they were younger kids again and I hadn’t had a problem with them before...”

“Alright, good point” Mattie nodded and leaned forward, mimicking Ali’s position. “But the camp before that one, they were older weren’t they? And how did that one go again?”

“Yeah, the one in August was the little kids. The one in July was fourteen plus” Ali thought hard to get the details correct. “And the one two weeks ago was a mix.”

“Excellent, so how did you feel working at those camps with the older kids, the fourteen-year olds and up?”

Ali sat back with a surprised look on her face. She chewed her bottom lip and stared at Mattie. The therapist tried to keep the smile off of her face as she spoke again.

“Sydney’s spring soccer was with her high school girls” she said the words slowly and clearly, making sure the brunette took them all in. “And the work you did with Tanner and your father is exactly where you last were in your previous soccer life.”

The two women continued to stare at each other as the brunette struggled to put things together in her agitated brain.

“And you were able to participate and function in all of those situations, correct?” Mattie nudged her one more time, her eyes dancing with mirth.

“Yeah, I was” Ali’s words came out slowly and heavily as her thoughts collided with the facts that Mattie had just presented to her. “But...”

“I think you’ve made great progress Ali. Especially the work with Tanner. That takes you right...”
back to where your biggest disappointment took place. But you’ve been able to work with him all summer. I think he, and your Dad who was your first and longest tenured coach, have been instrumental in your growth. You have definitely made great progress. It may not have been the progress you expected, but if you look at all of the soccer things you’ve done this year I think you’ll see how far you’ve come.”

The therapist smiled broadly at the stunned woman sitting in front of her. She could see Ali’s brain furiously trying to process everything. The brunette looked up at her hopefully and then dropped her eyes. Then she looked up again with both eyebrows raised in disbelief before dropping her head again.

“I’m not saying we’re all the way there yet” Mattie cautioned. “We might be, but we might not be. But I’ve been waiting for you to realize that your hard work has been paying off. And when you were so frustrated about the lack of progress today...”

“I’m so sorry Mattie” Ali apologized quickly. “I’m kind of a maniac when I go through this two week wait thing, we both are.”

“It’s ok” the therapist smiled. “I can’t even imagine what that feels like. I just felt like you needed a little boost this time so I kind of walked you through it.”

“Thank you!” the brunette exclaimed with a bright smile. “And don’t worry, I won’t tell anybody you gave me a break this time” she chuckled.

“Listen, I know you’re excited. But next time I want you to come ready to talk about a moment from each soccer event this year when you felt like you wanted to disconnect. Write them down and we’ll go through them...”

Ali heard the words but she was only half-listening as her heart soared. She knew she had more work to do but she couldn’t believe she had come so far and not even realized it. What kind of blinders did she wear sometimes in her life? She thought back to last year when she had explained to Mattie what soccer meant to her and how much she loved it and why she loved it. That had been the easiest part. The worst was in January when they talked about her injury and her fury and her rage. Those were dark sessions filled with tears and shouts and screams. Mattie hadn’t suggested writing another letter this time. She wanted Ali to actively vocalize what she was feeling. When the brunette looked at her like she was nuts she had quickly reassured her that the room was soundproofed so she didn’t have to worry about anybody else hearing her. There had been something about screaming and crying until her throat was raw that helped Ali purge so much of that anger and hatred. It had only been three sessions like that, but by the end of the third one she really felt like a weight had somehow been lifted off of her heart and even her soul. And, just as she had been surprised at how effective the letter had been before, she was shocked at how healing that vocalization had been. She never would have believed something like that could actually work for her, and yet, a month later she was helping Sydney get her girls ready for Spring soccer one afternoon a week and Saturday mornings.

The more Ali thought about it, the more sure she was that Tanner had been the key. Or maybe it was her father? Something about working with those two forced her to hit some sort of reset button. It had rebooted soccer for her. But she had to work up to it. If she hadn’t worked with the high school girls first, there was no way she could have been ready for Tanner and her dad. The brunette cried as she drove home from Mattie’s office that Friday afternoon. She was so lucky to have such good people in her life. Look at who had helped her with this – Sydney, Tanner and her dad, and Ashlyn. She knew Tanner hadn’t been involved in it for any other reason than to get better himself and she was fine with that. But Sydney, her dad and Ashlyn had all invited her, repeatedly to join
them and encouraged her when she hesitated. They had each handled her in their own way, but they had done it. They had gotten her back onto the pitch. She didn’t love soccer again, yet. But she could see now, with a little bit more work with Mattie, that eventually she would.

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The rest of the two-week wait dragged on just as it had the last time. The second week was twice as hard as the first week, again. They were busy, thankfully, but every idle thought and spare moment was spent wondering and hoping and trying not to get too excited. It was exhausting. They didn’t tell anybody else this time, well, except for Whitney and Sydney. But nobody besides their besties. The only saving grace this time was that they had Drew who continued to light up their lives. He was sixteen months old at the end of September and he kept them on their toes and then some. He was walking and talking and laughing and playing and throwing temper tantrums like every other kid his age. His little brain was learning so many things every minute of every day, except when he was asleep, that it was hard to keep up with everything. Sometimes when Ashlyn came home from an away game she felt like she had missed two months of his life instead of just two days.

He had taken his first steps in mid-July at Ashlyn’s soccer camp. Ali and Sydney were both helping with the campers and Deb and Sandi played with their grandsons off to the side as they watched the proceedings. All of a sudden Deb let out a whoop and a squeal and Ashlyn, who had been closest, came running over to see what was wrong. The combination of trying to follow active Cash around and wanting to join his mamas on the pitch compelled him to take his first, lurching steps. The keeper called a time-out for the camp so she and Ali could watch him do it again. Nobody minded. Who could possibly be upset with the big, bad goalkeeper they admired showing her most tender side to them right there at camp?

Two months later he was running around dangerously fast and seemingly out of control. The house had been child-proofed since he started crawling about nine months before, but they had to go around with new eyes, looking for sharp corners and other dangers for their extremely active toddler. Drew was pushing boundaries and testing rules almost every day too. He had been put in his first time-out punishment shortly after his first birthday. They only kept him there for two minutes, but it was the point that there were repercussions to his behavior that was important, not the length of time. He loved books and he insisted on turning the pages for you. He could point out almost everything you read to him on the pages. He understood way more words than he could say, by about a thousand. Ashlyn couldn’t find her keys one morning and asked her wife, who was feeding their son in his highchair by the kitchen table, if she had seen them. They had both been stunned when Drew pointed to the keys on the counter by the coffee maker and grinned.

He was at the age where he acted on every impulse and the real parenting challenge was not laughing or encouraging him when he did something wrong, no matter how fucking cute it was. Good luck. Like all sixteen-month olds, he was a ham and loved the attention he would get when he did something good or right or funny. Ashlyn swore her heart exploded the first time she walked through the mudroom door and Drew ran to her legs and hugged them as he said ‘mama’. One of his favorite things to do was to cook at his kid-size kitchen that they had set up for him in the family room. It was just a stove top, counter with a sink and a fridge, all fused together into one playset piece, but he loved it. He would spend lots of time putting the plastic food away and into the plastic cooking pots and pans. And he would always bring a plate of whatever he had made to you and stand there expectantly until you ate it and told him how delicious it was. He was shy around strangers but didn’t take too long to warm up to someone he recognized. His best friend was Fred and he would often bring whatever toy or book or puzzle board he was interested in over to the dog and sit down on the floor next to him to play with it or read it. He would reach his hand over and pat him every once in a while, almost as if he was making sure the dog was still there.
Drew’s very most favorite thing of all was the beach. Ashlyn took him as often as possible, even if it was just for a quick visit before dinner once she got home from training. He was a water baby for sure, but even if they didn’t get wet he loved the beach. He stuck his face up into the wind or breeze and sniffed the salty air and then grinned. Sometimes he would close his eyes while he tipped his face up and smelled the air as they made the short walk to the beach. He did all of the annoying things that toddlers do too. He threw things like toys and sippy cups and food and then wailed when he was corrected by one of his mamas. He hit and bit and stomped and even banged his head against the wall once in anger. They could tell when he was about to have a fit because he would start to misbehave as if he wanted one of his parents to react to him and punish him. Then he would have his tantrum and be back to his normal self a half hour later. It got to the point where they knew if he hadn’t had his fit for the day that it was coming. The later in the day it came, the worse it would be too.

He loved his daycare teacher and classmates and enjoyed seeing them every day. Cash was his favorite, of course, and Drew followed the three-year old around constantly whether they were at daycare or somewhere else. Drew wasn’t nearly as exciting to the older toddler so Cash wasn’t always willing to play with him. They were both good boys so they rarely fought. If they did it didn’t last long and hugs and kisses followed quickly. Drew was average size for his age, not too big and not too small. He still had thick dark brown hair and Ashlyn still put it up into a little gnome hairdo when she gave him a bath and washed his hair. His eyes had changed from the dark blue eyes that almost all caucasian babies are born with to a light brown color that seemed to be getting a little darker as he got older. They were almost the same color as Ali’s and Ashlyn hoped they would eventually get there. In all other regards, he was a clone of his brunette mother. Neither mama could have loved another human being more than they loved that little boy.

As they sat in the waiting room of the fertility clinic two weeks after their IUI treatment they were quiet. Ashlyn wasn’t pacing the floor this time and Ali wasn’t reading a magazine. They held hands and were quiet and still. Ashlyn had been in a bad mood because Abby Smith had started the Chicago game Saturday afternoon when it had originally been one of the blonde’s starts. The commentators on the Lifetime TV Game of the Week broadcast had talked about the Breakers’ goalkeeper conundrum ad nauseam and social media was abuzz with hurt feelings and fighting fandoms and all sorts of ridiculous rumors. As soon as Ashlyn had worked her way past all of that crap as well as the sting of losing her start, one of the little girls at the soccer camp she had run the day after the game asked her about it in front of the whole camp. That was just what the keeper needed – to explain to thirty little eight-year old boys and girls why she wasn’t starting anymore. It had been a long night at the big old house as Ali tried to soothe her wife’s hurt pride and bruised ego. That was how the two-week wait ended and brought them to their Monday morning appointment.

“You know what?” Ashlyn said quietly as they waited for their name to be called.

“Tell me honey” Ali encouraged and squeezed her wife’s hand as she studied the side of her beautiful face.

“It would be one thing if I lost my starting spot because I couldn’t play anymore. Or because she was better than me. I could live with that. I mean, it would suck, but I couldn’t really be mad about it. I know I can’t play forever. I understand that there’s a limit to how long I get to do this gig. But I’m so pissed at US Soccer for making coach do this. It’s all politics and it’s not fair. Fuckers.”

“I’m so sorry Ash.”

They were quiet again. Ali wanted to give her wife time to say whatever else she needed to say. It was the most she had talked about the issue since before the game on Saturday. The brunette just
sat there holding her hand, gently rubbing her thumb over the back of it. Ali turned her head and pressed a kiss into her shoulder and then rested her head against it with a small sigh.

“Sitting here, with you, waiting to find out if the most important thing in the world is going to happen to us again really puts things in perspective though. That’s for sure” Ashlyn’s voice was quiet but clear, her words measured as she spoke. “It’s given me a whole lot to think about.”

“We can always get you to a different team, one that doesn’t have a US Soccer keeper on the roster...”

“Nah, I’m not moving again” Ashlyn interrupted softly. “I’m home. We’re home. I’ve known for years that this is my last stop.”

“So, what are you saying then?” Ali kept her head against her keeper’s shoulder, afraid to move and disrupt the conversation, terrifying as it was.

“I’m not really sure yet” she answered honestly. “I’m not playing for another team. I think I can be a back-up and still help the team in training and in the locker room...”

“Ashlyn” Ali sat up and turned her body to face her wife, still clutching her hand. “You are one of the best keepers in the league, if not the very best. You’re not fucking sitting on the bench because of politics. I won’t let you do that. You don’t have too many years left but you have some and you deserve to play and start until somebody beats you out fair and square. That hasn’t happened yet and, honestly, I can’t see it happening anytime soon. Don’t sell yourself short honey. I can think of four teams just off the top of my head who would kill to have you starting for them.”

Ashlyn squeezed her wife’s hand and then pulled it to her lips to kiss it. That was the pitbull she knew and loved. It felt amazing to have Ali fighting for her and believing in her so absolutely. The keeper couldn’t help but smile as she looked at Ali’s nostrils flaring and eyes blazing at the injustice of Ashlyn’s situation.

“I believe you honey” she smiled shyly at the brunette. “Let’s just see what happens. We’ve got a championship to win for Whitney first and we can’t afford to be distracted by any of this other bullshit. And, most importantly, we’ve got some news of our own to share, hopefully.” She squeezed Ali’s hand again. “Nothing matters more than that.”

An hour later they walked hand in hand to Ashlyn’s car with the biggest grins on their faces, all thoughts of soccer long forgotten. They had to go back in three days for the triple safe, official official declaration that Ali was pregnant after one more beta test. But, barring something totally crazy happening, they were going to have another baby!
The phone calls to their families happened at the end of the week, after the last beta test came back and confirmed Ali’s pregnancy. Everyone was ecstatic and the couple felt the love being sent their way from all of their far-flung loved ones. They gave the same instructions as last time – immediate family only was being told. After the first trimester they would make an official announcement and let the rest of their friends and family know.

The most difficult phone call had happened right after they had recovered from the shock of their Monday appointment.

“What’s the word Alibaba?!” Sydney’s voice was loud and excited as it came through Ali’s cellphone during the coach’s lunch break.

“I’m pregnant!” Ali squealed back, matching her best friend’s enthusiasm and volume level.

“Oh my God, I’m so happy for you boo! You have one more test right?”

“Yeah, I go in Thursday for one last beta test and then we’ll know for absolute sure but they’re pretty sure we’re pregnant.”

Ali paused for a minute, unsure of what to say or how to say how sorry she was to be pregnant when Sydney had lost her baby three months ago.

“Don’t do it Al” Sydney’s voice was low and serious. “Don’t you feel sorry for me,”

“Syd, I...”

“I mean it” the coach’s words were solemn. “I’m ok and we’re going to start trying again after the holidays. I don’t want you to even think about it again. Do you understand me?”

“I do, but I...I just want you to know that if you need to talk about it, ever, you have to promise me that you’ll still talk to me about it. I don’t want you to keep anything from me just because I’m pregnant. Ok?”

It was Sydney’s turn to take a beat.

“We’re still going to be the godparents right?” she tried to ignore Ali’s question entirely.

“Not unless you tell me you’re ok with what I just asked you Sydney Rae” Ali’s voice was firm and unwavering.

“Ok” she replied and sighed loudly into the phone. “I guess.”

“Do you promise?”

There was another lapse as Sydney stayed quiet.
“Syd, come on. Promise me. This is important.”

“I promise” her voice was quiet and surprisingly fragile for the strong young woman.

They were both quiet for a minute as the weight of their words registered with each of them.

“Thank you boo” Ali took a breath and let it out. “And of course you and Dom are the godparents. No doubt about it.”

Sydney could hear the smile in her best friend’s voice and it lifted her spirits and reminded her why she loved the brunette so much. Ali was always there for her, well, except for those few months after Sydney went back to work after Drew was born, but they had worked that out. All of Sydney’s life, Ali had been her greatest defender and best supporter and dearest friend. She had been there for her that summer as the coach dealt with one of the saddest experiences of her life. Ali wasn’t pushy about it like Sydney was. She was just...there, a constant. A steady, still, ever-present force of good and light and love. Part of the reason Sydney was doing so well after losing the baby and getting ready to start trying again was because of her best friend’s love and kindness. The coach felt her own face break into a smile as she thought again about the good news Ali had just received.

“Do me a favor, make it a girl this time would ya?”

The Breakers finished the season strong. Ashlyn started the first home game in October against Orlando. Abby got the next game away at Washington. Which meant Ashlyn got the last game of the season, a home game against Minnesota that was the Lifetime TV Game of the Week. They won all three games and finished the season at 19-2-5 with a total of 62 points. They had accomplished their first mission. They had won the Supporter’s Shield and they celebrated like crazy as they received the shield that evening on their home pitch. For whatever reason, Lifetime TV hadn’t picked up the story of Whitney’s retirement yet. When the sideline reporter interviewed Ashlyn after the game the keeper made sure to announce that they had completed part one of their season-long goal to honor their beloved captain. She was peppered with questions about not starting every game and sharing time with Abby Smith. She took the high road and said all the right things about being ready when her number was called and doing whatever was best for the team. Ashlyn brought it all back to Whitney and told them point blank that they should be interviewing her tonight and not the keeper.

Ashlyn’s 35th birthday was on Monday that week, while the team was preparing for their home playoff game against Chicago coming up that Saturday. The irony was not lost on the keeper. She had done some research over the past several weeks and there had been several goalkeepers who played, and played very well, into their mid-30’s. The two most recent names were Nicole Barnhart and Hope Solo. Barnhart retired last year at age 37 after not starting the last two years of her career. Ashlyn thought Barnie probably could have started the second to last season but she definitely didn’t have it her final season. And Solo was still going strong at age 37. She had to take a year off to have her shoulder reconstructed a couple of years ago, but she still started for her NWSL team, the Vancouver Greys. Ashlyn wasn’t sure how she stacked up with those two players but definitely felt like she had at least two or three more high-quality seasons in her. Nobody would be able to make her believe otherwise.

When Ali asked her what she wanted to do for her birthday the week before, Ashlyn had told her she just wanted to have a quiet night at home with her wife and son and dogs. Maybe a piece of birthday cake to celebrate and that was it. She was tired, cranky and stressed about winning the do-or-die playoff game that would get them into the Championship game. The brunette met her
birthday girl at the mudroom door when she got home from training around 4pm. She kissed her lips and felt her heart surge with love when Ashlyn was disappointed that Drew wasn’t there too.

“Aw, you’ll see him in a little while babe” Ali cooed into her ear as she hugged her. “He’s having dinner at my dad’s but I’m picking him up in a few hours.”

The keeper pulled back and looked tired and confused.

“Just go upstairs and take your shower honey. Everything’s ok. We’re not going anywhere. I just wanted us to have a little alone time on my favorite day of the year” she winked at the blonde and patted her on her butt as she started to walk into the kitchen towards the backstairs.

“But what are we doing?” Ashlyn’s tired expression had the tiniest hint of excitement underneath it.

“Just go take your shower” the brunette giggled.

When the keeper finished her shower she dried herself off and saw an envelope on the vanity. She opened it up and pulled out a note with instructions on it. Ashlyn enjoyed the lavender scent that wafted out of the envelope as she read the note – lavender always made her think of getting into bed with Ali because her nighttime facial moisturizer had lavender in it.

‘Come find me waiting for you where one of your challenges is still not complete yet...
Clothing optional’

The blonde felt the corners of her mouth curl up into a smile as she tried to remember what they had left to do for the furniture challenge. They had completed the fireplace challenge a couple of years ago and it’s not like they were adding new fireplaces to the house. But the furniture challenge was turning out to be an ongoing thing. Her first thought was the new dining room table, simply because it was the newest piece of furniture they owned, aside from Drew’s crib and changing table but there was no way they were going to be part of any sex challenge. No way. Ashlyn chuckled and blushed a little as she remembered how they had rung in the new year all over that new dining room table just ten months ago. Damn that was an awesome night. They had crossed the bench seat by the bay window in the living room off the list last year after they got home from their honeymoon and before Ali got so pregnant that the bench seat would have been too uncomfortable for her. And Ali’s old dining room table was set up in the loft of the garage but that was already done too. Ashlyn had been getting the house in order before the baby came, doing her nesting, and Ali had surprised her up in the garage after she had finished cleaning it for the first time in several months. The keeper had almost forgotten how much fun it had been trying to keep up with her pregnant wife’s insatiable appetite for sex. She looked forward to more of the same now that Ali was pregnant again.

The blonde grinned again as she remembered the only other place there was furniture that they hadn’t fucked on yet. Her studio. She threw one of her oversize t-shirts over her head and started towards the stairs to the third floor, enjoying the feel of the cool, air-conditioned air on her bare ass. She surprised herself with how happy she felt about their little adventure. The past two days had been stressful and hard and it was only going to get worse as the big game on Saturday approached. But all she could think about right at that moment was her beautiful wife. Ali would never cease to amaze her. Ashlyn knocked on the closed door to the studio and took a couple of deep breaths to help get her breathing back to normal. She must have run up the stairs without realizing it because she was panting a little bit. She could faintly hear the music from one of her favorite playlists, slow and sexy beats that always put them both in the mood, as she stood there waiting.
“Come in” Ali called to her in a seductive voice that made the keeper’s core twitch.

The work table in the middle of the studio was big with a broad top and wheels on the bottom of each leg. The fancy lights that Ali had bought for her were hung above it so Ashlyn could point them in all sorts of different directions to achieve whatever lighting effect she wanted for whatever painting or sketch she was working on. The table top was white with black legs and support structures underneath it, very modern and mechanical looking. When Ashlyn opened the door to the studio she thought she was going to pass out.

The music flooded her ears as she felt her own juices flood between her legs. The room was dark with only a dim light over on the desk in the back, left corner and a scented candle burning on the coffee table in front of the sofa in the back, right corner of the room. The fancy lights that hung from the ceiling were on at a low setting and pointed at the top of the big work table. Ali, completely naked with her luscious hair down and around her right shoulder, sat atop the table with a sultry smirk on her face. She had her left leg bent at the knee and out to her side while her right leg was stretched straight across the table so she was spread open and waiting for her birthday girl. Her right hand moved slowly and seductively between her breasts and her hips while her other hand held the neck of an expensive, new bottle of whiskey. The bottle, wrapped with a black ribbon and bow on it, stood on the table, right between her open legs.

Ashlyn’s heart beat fast and the blood raced through her body and pounded in her ears, almost drowning out the thudding of the bass coming from the portable speaker. She opened her mouth to say something but nothing came out, not even a whimper or a whine or anything. Instead she swallowed and took two stiff steps towards the table, as if her legs had forgotten how to work too. Her arms hung limply at her sides as she slowly moved towards the sexiest woman she had ever seen. She tried to lick her lips, hoping that would help get her voice working again, but even her tongue was dry.

“You look a little...thirsty” Ali teased in a low, sexy voice. “Why don’t I fix you a drink, birthday girl.”

The brunette reached behind her with her right hand and brought a short tumbler forward and placed it in front of the whiskey bottle. There were three whiskey stones in it and Ashlyn heard them clinking against the glass as Ali set it down and then opened the bottle. When she lifted the bottle up the keeper looked expectantly at the place it had been between her legs, hoping for a glance at her favorite spot in the whole world, but the tumbler was in the way. Instead she watched the brunette pour the amber-colored liquor into the glass, sloppily splashing it around the tumbler and onto her right leg and the table. She put the fingers of her left hand into the stream of alcohol, causing more splashes, and then trailed them up her body. She started just above her short hairs and spread the cool liquor trail all the way up to her neck and around her breasts.

“Oopsie” she purred. “I spilled a little.”

She returned the bottle, without the cap, to its’ place between her legs and lifted the glass of whiskey to her own lips. Ali took a slow sip as she spread the last of the whiskey from her fingers onto her mound.

“Mmmmmmm...” she hummed after she swallowed. Her words were slow and sultry and deliberate as her dark eyes bored into Ashlyn’s. “Do you want some?”

Ashlyn was at the edge of the table, turned on beyond belief and still having trouble getting her mouth to work. She opened it again but still nothing came out so she simply nodded her head and reached for the glass in her wife’s outstretched hand. Ali let her take the tumbler without touching her. She wanted the first contact between them to be somewhere else if she could somehow make it
happen. The keeper took a big gulp of whiskey, never taking her eyes off of her beautiful brunette, and swallowed hard, enjoying the burn down her throat and into her chest. Fuck was this hot!

Ali’s hand went back to her torso, teasing the keeper as it moved between her breasts and hips and mound, which was still blocked from view by the bottle. Ashlyn moved her eyes all around her wife’s body, taking in every place the liquor glimmered in the low lights, as she took another big gulp and swallowed again, this time with a dark smirk on her face. Ali felt a tug in her core when she saw that look on her keeper’s face. She was back and ready to play. The brunette felt her heart race as she picked up the bottle and moved it behind her, exposing her wet and wanting pussy to the blonde for the very first time. She felt another wave of passion pool between her legs when she saw her wife’s dark eyes get even darker at the sight. Ashlyn took one last swig and finished the whiskey in her glass, already feeling the alcohol spreading its’ warmth through her entire body.

“Maybe you can help me clean this mess up” Ali said hotly as she ran her fingers through the drops of whiskey on the table between her legs and then dragged them up and over her own clit, making her own breath hitch at the contact.

Ashlyn was on fire now, the liquor in her system lubricating everything from her tongue to her center to her inhibitions.

“Yeah, I can definitely help you with that” she husked out, surprised to hear her own voice after being silent for so long.

Instead of diving face first into Ali’s gorgeous pussy she took control of the situation, at least for the moment, and walked around behind the table, eyes never leaving the brunette’s. She saw the art supply cart that Ali was using for her props and set her empty glass down on it as the brunette turned her head and looked over her shoulder to watch. Ashlyn picked up the bottle of whiskey and poured herself some more, resting the bottle and its’ cap on the cart when she was finished. She stood there and took a small sip as Ali bit her bottom lip in anticipation.

The keeper put her glass back down on the cart and moved to the end of the work table, dragging a finger along the edge of it as she walked. She climbed up onto the end of the table in an unsurprisingly athletic move, kneeling at the end of it and grinning wickedly.

It was her turn to enjoy the stunned and helpless look on her wife’s face. She had literally turned the tables on Ali’s little game and the brunette hadn’t expected it. But as much as she wanted to draw this out and enjoy teasing her, Ashlyn took one look at her wife’s drenched folds, already swollen and waiting for her, and felt her resolve vanish. Ali’s chest and neck were already flushed and her breasts were starting to heave as her breathing got labored. The keeper locked eyes with her as she slowly pulled her over-sized t-shirt up and over her head. She felt a gush between her legs when she heard Ali gasp and moan at the sight of her naked body in front of her. The brunette moved her hand over her own mound and whimpered as her fingers grazed the top of her clit.

“Ashlyn...” she breathed out with the last of her patience.

“Help is on the way baby” the keeper purred as she crawled another foot forward and then lowered her lips to Ali’s outstretched leg next to her.

The shock that passed between them as they finally touched was powerful and exciting. Ashlyn kissed and nipped her way up Ali’s right leg, making her twitch the whole time.

“Jesus, babe...” Ali moaned as she reached for her wife’s head with her right hand.

The blonde savored the bits of whiskey she licked off of Ali’s upper thigh, moaning herself at the intoxicating mixture of whiskey on her lips and pussy in her nose.
“Fuck, you smell good.”

Ali tugged on the blonde hair once she finally got her fingers into it, trying to pull her where she needed her most. It wasn’t necessary though. Nothing in the world could have stopped Ashlyn from burying her face between her wife’s legs and devouring every inch of her delicious, drenched pussy. The sound that the brunette made when Ashlyn finally began to suck on her lips and clit was low and primal, deeper and darker than she had ever made before. Ali’s legs were already quivering as she gripped the back of her keeper’s head and groaned in pleasure. The powerful charge that passed between them had done something to Ashlyn too. As pleased as she was to have regained control, she felt an uncomfortable pull in her core that was almost painful. The want was so intense and so deep that it actually pulled her attention away from the heavenly delight she was experiencing with her tongue and mouth. Ashlyn was still on her hands and knees and she reached between her own legs quickly to try and relieve the pull she felt there. Her lips paused for a moment as she tried to refocus.

“Oh don’t stop” Ali begged, opening her eyes to see what had caused the delay. “Please don’t stop.”

“Never baby” Ashlyn replied and pushed her face farther into her wife’s silky folds, swirling her tongue around and teasing her entrance with the tip.

Ali watched her wife shift her weight at her hips and move her hand between her own legs, wondering what was going on down there. She knew that if Ashlyn had her way, she would make Ali come first every time before working for her own release. It was part of the reason she had set up this little scene for her. Not only was she going to let her go first, but she had splashed some fancy whiskey around too just to make it extra special. Her thoughts were interrupted when she felt the glorious vibrations from a loud moan the keeper made between her legs. God that felt amazing. In a flash of clarity after the shivers from that big moan, Ali understood what the problem was. Ashlyn was too worked up and trying to find a way to ease her own want so she could keep fucking her. That was a high-class problem to have.

“Oh, babe, Ashlyn...” Ali finally got her wife’s attention by pulling her face up to look at her with both hands. “Lie on your back.”

It was a simple command and, despite the gameplay of who was in charge at any given moment, the blonde obeyed after only a slight hesitation. She rolled over onto her back, enjoying the cool of the smooth table top against her skin, and wondering what her beautiful brunette had planned. She should have known though. If only all of her cylinders were firing together instead of feeling like they had just been short-circuited by lust and passion she might have been able to figure it out. They had been having sex together for five and a half years and they both still got incredibly horny as they made each other come. It was usually only sheer exhaustion that ever made them stop fucking each other once they started. There had been a few rough months after the baby had been born, but their sex life had come back better than ever. It was as if surviving the trial by fire of childbirth and taking care of a newborn had joined them on an even deeper level. The increased level of trust and love had further intensified the sex, if that was even possible.

Ashlyn grinned as she lay there and felt Ali moving head-first down her body on her hands and knees, placing hot, open-mouthed kisses to all of her favorite places. The brunette lowered her breasts down and dragged them across her wife’s stomach and lower abs as her mouth reached its’ destination.

“Oh fuck yeah” the blonde moaned and bent her knees up, angling them out and tilting her hips up to give Ali better access to her painfully throbbing pussy. “Your mouth...so good...”
The keeper was so lost in the moment and so desperate for some relief inside her core that she barely even touched her wife other than absent-mindedly running her hands up and down her thighs. Ali knew her mouth, talented as it was, would not bring Ashlyn the relief she needed. She enjoyed a few long licks and sucks through the blonde’s soaked folds and then briefly sucked her clit into her mouth, moaning loudly and making Ashlyn squeeze her thighs with her strong fingers.

“Please baby...” the keeper whimpered as she screwed her eyes shut and softly banged the back of her head against the table.

Ali knew that if her wife wasn’t even touching her yet that she was really far gone and in need of some serious fucking.

“I got you babe” the brunette mumbled against her clit as she pushed two fingers deep into her entrance.

Ashlyn’s whole body trembled and she tried to squeeze her wife’s fingers inside her to get more friction.

“More” she grunted out as she rocked her hips to meet Ali’s thrusts. “I need more...”

The brunette stopped her fingers and added a third before pushing them back inside her wife’s pulsing walls. She pumped slowly for a minute, just to make sure, and then increased her speed a bit.

“Unnnnhhh...fuck...oh yeah...unnnhhh...”

Ali pressed a kiss into her clit and then turned her head to the side and started sucking and nibbling at the inside of her thigh, not wanting her to come quite so fast. The keeper in turn, finally feeling the itch inside her core being scratched, was able to focus on her wife’s pussy that was literally dripping above her face. She felt dizzy for a few seconds as her already incredibly high level of lust and passion increased even more at the gorgeous sight. Ashlyn licked her lips and tried to steady herself as she pulled Ali’s hips down onto her face. She didn’t take her time or move gently. She grabbed the top of her thighs and yanked her down and back until her face was completely buried in her flooded folds.

“Yesssss” the brunette hissed as she leaned her head against her wife’s thigh for a minute and tried not to lose momentum with her thrusts. “Fuck, yes...”

Ashlyn knew she had some time to make up, having taken so long to start enjoying the delicacy currently in her mouth. She pressed her face as far into Ali’s pussy as she could and moved her head from side to side, jutting her chin out to try and hit her clit at the same time. Ali’s whole body was moving as she pumped her fingers into the blonde, her pace increased again so the thrusts were fast and deep and hard. She loved the way their bodies felt sliding against each other and her keeper’s tongue was making her legs start to tremble. Ashlyn was close to her orgasm, even without any attention on her aching clit, and she was trying to hold off until her beautiful brunette was closer to coming too.

“Mmmmmmm” she moaned loudly against Ali’s sweet flesh, sending delicious reverberations all through her body and making the brunette groan when she felt them. “Mmmmm.”

The keeper shoved two fingers into her wife’s center and started thrusting hard and fast, biting the inside of her thigh hard at the same time and making Ali growl and hiss in response. They were both close and ready to come undone. Everything was moving and shaking and the sound of their hands slapping against wet skin filled their ears and made them even hornier. The table moved with
them, wheels creeping a half inch one way and then another inch the other way, depending on who was thrusting harder at the time. As they felt things escalating and the pumping became harder and faster, the table turned a bit to one side and one of the wheels started squeaking under the extra weight and pressure it bore.

Ali finally brought her mouth back to her keeper’s clit and sucked on it hard. She could feel her own legs starting to give out on her and knew she wouldn’t be able to hold herself much longer. The brunette flicked the sensitive nub a few times and then released it, lapping at it and circling it with her tongue as she kept pounding into Ashlyn’s pussy. They were both sweating and panting as they worked towards their release.

“Oh Fuck...” Ashlyn grunted out as she lay her head back against the table again.

She moved her left hand up to start rubbing Ali’s clit while her other hand kept thrusting deep into her core. She felt the brunette’s walls starting to close in around her fingers and knew she would come soon. She increased the pressure on her clit and tried to concentrate as her own pleasure spiraled up and up. Ali’s legs were sliding farther away from her and Ashlyn could feel her feisty wife fighting to keep her arm moving so vigorously while she worked on her clit.

“I’m so close baby...” the blonde panted out. “I fucking love you.”

Ali didn’t think she could keep going. Her arm felt like it was about to fall off and she was getting so distracted by her own approaching orgasm. In a last-ditch effort, she dug the nails of her left hand into Ashlyn’s thigh and scratched at her skin as she flicked her strong tongue against her clit as fast and hard as she could.

“Ali!!!!” the keeper cried out as she came hard, head banging against the table top again and muscles clenching underneath her brunette’s body.

Relief washed over Ali as she enjoyed the front row seat and watched her wife’s orgasm take over. She hadn’t realized how hard she had been trying to hold on and get her off. But once Ashlyn shouted her name, Ali relaxed a tiny bit. All it took was one or two more seconds of pressure against her throbbing clit and she followed the love of her life over the edge into ecstasy.

“Oh my God...yessss!!!!!!!” she yelled. “Fuck!!”

She dropped down on top of Ashlyn, completely exhausted and unable to support herself anymore. They jerked and twitched against each other, stomachs slapping and sliding around as they tried to hold on with their tired arms. It was a long, sexy, sloppy few minutes as they rode out their orgasms, moaning and groaning and grabbing each other.

“Jesus fucking Christ” Ashlyn gasped out as she finally stopped moving. Her chest was heaving under Ali’s full weight but this was the blonde’s favorite position in the world for post-orgasm snuggling. There was no way she was going to complain or move a muscle. If she had her way they would stay like this for the rest of the night. She breathed in deeply, enjoying the still strong scent of her wife’s pussy on her chest. “That was...wow.”

Ali picked her head up off of her keeper’s thigh and, still panting, sweetly kissed the scratches she had left there a few minutes ago. She couldn’t feel her right arm at all and wasn’t really sure where it even was. The brunette loved how close they were and how much of her skin was touching Ashlyn’s. She could feel one of her octopus spells coming over her as she clung to the blonde’s thigh with her left arm and hugged it tightly against her head.

“Wow is right babe” she panted out. “Happy fucking birthday to you” she chuckled, deep in her
throat and felt another lingering twitch shake one of her legs.

Ashlyn gently caressed the thick thighs on either side of her chest, occasionally rubbing Ali’s gorgeous ass and lower back too. The work table was remarkably uncomfortable and her back and shoulders were killing her, but she wasn’t moving first. No way. And Ali seemed to be letting her wife enjoy an extra special birthday treat because she lay there like that for a very long time. Part of it was her unexpected clinginess and part of it was on purpose because she knew Ashlyn loved it. After what felt like an eternity to her aching knees, the brunette finally made the first move.

“If your back is half as sore as my knees are we need to get off of this table” she giggled as she pulled her right hand up and let it lightly scratch over and around Ashlyn’s mound.

“No kidding” the blonde chuckled and then leaned her head up to kiss the back of one of her wife’s thighs. “If we were in any other position than this one I would have been up a long time ago.” She moved her lips to kiss the back of Ali’s other thigh, closing her eyes and enjoying how close they were.

“Well I can’t stand it anymore” Ali said with a sincere sigh as she kissed her keeper’s mound and started to get up on her hands and knees. “I’m sorry honey” she continued. “I promised myself I’d let you stay in your favorite spot because it was your birthday...”

“And you did” Ashlyn rubbed her thighs again and sat up as Ali moved off of her and sat down next to her, right next to her hip so they were facing each other. “I loved every minute of it, thank you.”

She leaned over and brought their lips together in a soft and slow kiss, making them both moan quietly.

“We never kissed once until right now” Ali said as she sat back with a surprised look on her face.

“Really?” the keeper asked and kissed her again. “Well, that was unbelievably hot and I can’t be responsible for anything that did or didn’t happen because I was out of my mind.”

Ali giggled and enjoyed another kiss from the blonde, moving her hands across Ashlyn’s flowers and butterflies next to her.

“And you may have ruined whiskey for me for the rest of my life too” she chuckled into the kiss and then pulled her wife into a hug.

“Aw, I didn’t mean to do that” she said softly, chin over her keeper’s shoulder as they hugged.

“Come on” Ashlyn groaned as she pulled back and moved towards the edge of the table. “I’m old now and I can’t sit on this anymore” she giggled and slid to her feet. She walked around to the other side and helped Ali off, hugging and holding her close once her feet hit the floor too. “I love you so much. Thank you for my birthday present. It was awesome.”

“I love you too honey” Ali kissed her bare shoulder. “But that wasn’t your present. Why don’t you go look over by the desk...”

The black, leather jacket that the blonde had been drooling over for the past two months hung on the back of the desk chair with a big red bow stuck to the back of its’ collar. Ashlyn had almost bought it twice but changed her mind because it was really expensive and she just couldn’t justify it, not with a new baby coming into their lives. She hadn’t talked about it with her wife though and was surprised and thrilled to see the jacket there.
“I’d tell you to try it on but you’re covered in...me and whiskey” Ali chuckled as she came up behind her keeper and hugged her.

Ashlyn plucked the bow off of it and stuck it to her short hairs, out of Ali’s view, and then lifted the jacket off of the chair so she could put it on.

“My two favorite things” she smirked at the brunette who had taken a step back to give her some room. “I hope this jacket smells like both those things forever” she grinned and her dimple popped out as she turned to face her wife.

“Oh my God Ashlyn” Ali laughed when she saw where the bow was.

“Thank you baby!” she enthused as she modeled the new jacket for the brunette. She turned from side to side and made her wife giggle and look at her with eyes full of pure love and happiness. “How did you know I wanted this?” she finally asked as she tugged carefully at one of the zippers on the sleeves.

“You showed it to me during the Olympics...I’m not surprised you don’t remember” she smiled warmly at the blonde. “And I’m not sure why you didn’t buy it but I have my suspicions. And I’m proud of you honey.”

“Proud of me? Why?” Ashlyn raised her eyes to meet the brunette’s.

“You’ve been really good about sticking to our budget, we both have, and I wanted to reward you and treat you because you work hard and you deserve it.”

They had both gotten a little crazy after Drew was born, buying him ridiculous things he didn’t need and would never use. Ashlyn was making a lot of money now, and Ali was making decent money – not as much as her old sales job yet but not too far off. But as they paid their bills this Spring it just became crystal clear that they needed to be a lot smarter about how they spent their money. They came up with a monthly budget that they could both live with and promised to hold each other accountable. And for the past six months they had both been very good with their budget. This jacket was Ali’s only real splurge and she hoped the blonde would let her get away with it.

“Al, I love it, but it’s so expensive...” she hesitated as she started to take it off with a serious expression on her face.

“You can’t return it honey” Ali giggled. “You really want somebody else walking around in a sexy leather jacket that smells like me?”

“Oooh, you don’t fight fair” she grinned back at the brunette. “Fine, I’ll keep it but you have to promise to go easy on my Christmas present instead. Ok?”

Ali pursed her lips and pretended to consider the proposition even though she knew instantly that she would accept it.

“Deal” she finally said and beamed at her beautiful wife. Ali backed up a couple of steps and sat down on the couch. “Now why don’t you come over here and let me unwrap my present” she teased hotly, emphasizing the ‘my’, as she dropped her eyes to the big red bow still stuck to Ashlyn’s mound.

Ashlyn’s eyes lit up when she saw the brunette’s begin to darken and she started to take her new jacket off so they could have more sex.
“No no babe... keep it on...”
Too Good to Be True

The Breakers won their playoff game against Chicago that Saturday but it was by far the closest the Red Stars had come to defeating the Boston team with Ashlyn in goal. Christen Press had put on another brilliant display, attacking the Breakers’ backline relentlessly all game long. And, once again, Ashlyn Harris had been the difference-maker. She played one of the best games of her career and one of her incredible saves made #1 on SportsCenter’s countdown that night. The Red Stars were getting better and better every year and would probably have won a championship by now if the Thorns and Breakers hadn’t had such a stranglehold on the game. After the two teams shook hands at the end of the game, almost all of the Red Stars made a point to give their best wishes to Whitney and congratulate her on her impressive career. It was a touching scene and the Lifetime TV cameras finally seemed to pick up on the storyline that had been driving so many of the Boston players all season long. Christen Press and Ashlyn shared another quiet moment to themselves, just as they had done the previous year.

“Don’t take this the wrong way Ash” Christen started with a frustrated half-smile on her pretty face. “But I sure wish it was you who was retiring” she chuckled and rolled her eyes. “I’m not getting any younger you know and I’d like to try and get to an actual Championship game before my time’s up too.”

“You’ll get there Chris” the keeper replied with a warm smile. “I know you will. And when you do, it’ll be that much sweeter because you will have worked so hard for it.”

The most stunning thing that happened that Playoff day was that by the end of the night out in Portland, Orlando had upset the second seeded Thorns and knocked them out of the playoffs. Nobody saw that coming. Well, nobody besides the Orlando team and their die-hard fans. The Thorns had lost a few players to retirement and injury that season, but were still expected to beat Orlando in that playoff game. They had finished in second place, behind only the Breakers in points for the season. But Orlando just never gave up. They fought tooth and nail and managed, with the help of Marta – the Brazilian international who had been the best player in the world, to score one more goal than Portland did. Marta was no spring chicken anymore. She was 35 years old, just like Ashlyn, and she may have lost a step but she still had more moves and savvy than the rest of the league put together. And the Orlando Pride were young and hungry and ready to try to upset the next great team in their way.

Championship week would start the very next Saturday, which also happened to be Halloween, with the runner up game between Chicago and Portland. Everyone who had any interest in soccer at all in Boston was excited for the week between that game and the Championship game on Saturday November 7th. The city of Boston pulled out all the stops to show the world how much it loved soccer in general and its’ two soccer teams specifically. The Breakers had been making tentative plans for weeks, hoping not to jinx anything, to bring back as many of their Pillars of Excellence award winners as possible for the pre-game ceremony on the 7th. Americans Angela Hucles, Kritine Lilly and Leslie Osborne would all be in attendance. The only player who couldn’t make it was Maren Meinert. The German striker was the first recipient of the award back in 2009. She taped a message saluting the Breakers and the city of Boston and wishing the team and organization good luck.

The NWSL used the week, as it had for the past several years, as a time for all of the owners to come together for meetings where they would collectively decide league business matters. There was more press coverage of the week than ever before and the city filled with media, sports agents, lots of NWSL players who weren’t playing in either game, and a rabid Orlando Pride fandom.
There were quite a few Chicago and Portland fans there too. Knight-Harris was busier than it had ever been. Not only were they working hard to support their athletes but they were also hosting a couple of seminars and meetings for the players and agents and even the referees group. It was an insanely busy week for both Ashlyn and Ali, but one they wouldn’t trade for anything. It was everything the team had worked for all season long. They were focused and determined to win the Championship game and give Whitney the send-off she so rightly deserved.

As the month of October began and the Supporters Shield was in their sights, Ashlyn designed a t-shirt and had them printed off for the team. They were Breakers blue and on the front was a series of images stacked on top of each other – the black, silhouetted profile of Whitney’s head with her signature ponytail and blue pre-wrap, then the Breakers logo with the actual breaker wave in full color against the black of the silhouette, then the white captain’s armband which Ashlyn embellished and added a heart to. The back said, in strong white letters: ‘Win It For Whitney 2020’. Ali had followed her gut, and her heart this time, and ordered several thousand of them to be printed in anticipation of the playoff game and then the Championship game and by the beginning of the week they were almost sold out. The players and staff all wore them to their big media day blitz on Wednesday as they had done for Ashlyn back in 2017 and every player made sure to talk about the impact Whitney Engen had had on her life or career during their time in Boston. The stoic defender had a difficult time holding herself together that day and was grateful for Rose Lavelle and her antics that kept her amused and laughing most of the day. Ashlyn had given certain players a job to do during the week to help ease Whitney’s stress. She picked a different player each day and put them in charge of making Whitney laugh. As long as nobody got hurt and they didn’t embarrass Whitney or the Breakers organization the keeper didn’t care how they did it.

It was the same logic that prompted the coach to load up the team on Thursday, normally the toughest practice day of the week, and take them all to a nearby water park for the day. The players were too tense and the pressure was definitely getting to them so he told Whitney to pick an outing and he would make it happen. They fooled around like ten-year olds and had the time of their lives sliding and rafting and swimming and even body surfing in the wave pool there. It had been just what the doctor ordered and when the team reconvened for training on Friday morning they were light and focused and formidable.

Ashlyn spent a lot of time that week at Whitney’s house in Cambridge as she had done for much of the season. In the past, they would just hang out at the Breakers facility between their morning and afternoon training sessions. But this year they drove the fifteen minutes to Whitney’s house and relaxed instead. They didn’t do it every day, but probably three times a week. Sometimes they brought another player or two with them and sometimes it was just the two of them. The keeper tried her best to remember every minute of that week with her best friend. She knew it would go by much too quickly and she wanted to make sure she could recall it in perfect detail. She ended up writing about it a lot in her journal each night when she got home.

“Hey, you know I never thanked you for not making us look bad” Whitney said one day while they were eating lunch at her house.

“What are you talking about?” Ashlyn asked, confused as they sat side by side on the couch watching a soccer game on tv and eating.

“The start against Chicago, you know, the big playoff game where you played like a superstar and won us the game?” the defender teased with a twinkle in her eye.

After the last regular season game Whitney Engen, Tasha Dowie, Angela Salem, Kristie Mewis, Julie King and Rose Lavelle went to the coach’s office to talk to him about the goalkeeper situation they had found themselves in. These were the leaders of the team and they had been patient and
understanding about the keeper change since it started happening after Abby Smith returned from
the Olympics. They knew it was a ballsy move to go and talk to the coach like that but they felt
very strongly that he needed to know how the team felt about it. They knew they were going to get
a tongue-lashing from the coach and they couldn’t blame him. It wasn’t their place to tell him who
to play and who to start. But they hadn’t worked all season long and won the Supporters Shield
just to lose the playoff game and maybe the Championship.

Whitney started, fearlessly telling the coach that the team had asked them to come and talk with
him and ask him to start Ashlyn against Chicago and then again in the Championship game if they
got that far. The coach responded as they expected him to, sputtering curse words and different
expressions of outrage, and then Tasha Dowie took over.

“Look coach, I know you don’t like that we’re here like this. We don’t much like it either to be
truthful. But here we are and we’ve got a problem because we’ve heard what’s going on and we’ve
made the best of it since Abby’s been back and we’ve not said one thing about it. Not any of us,
right?” her British accent making her strong words sound incongruously pretty and light. “But if
Ash doesn’t play against Chicago we can’t beat them and you know it. And we didn’t get this far
to lose our playoff game because US fucking soccer, excuse me, wants to tell you who the fuck to
play at keeper.”

As bullshit as he was at the audacity of the players coming to him and talking to him about his line-
up decisions, he knew they were right. Tasha was absolutely spot on and he couldn’t argue with
anything she said. So he sat there and stewed as they all took turns saying pretty much the same
thing but in different ways.

“Just so you know coach?” Rose offered in a questioning voice, not sure how her information
would be received, “Abby’s fine with it. We talked about it last night.”

“Oh well it’s good to know the players are fine with me making my own bloody starting line-ups!”
he bellowed when he couldn’t take it anymore. “Now get out of my office, the lot of you, go on!”
The vein in his neck looked like it was going to burst. “Engen. You stay.”

A few minutes later, after the other players had shuffled out of his office and closed the door
behind them, Whitney held her breath and waited for whatever harsh words were going to be flung
her way.

“You didn’t hear this from me” he leaned forward as he spoke, “but Harris is my starting keeper
for Chicago and the Championship game. I’m tired of the politics and bullshit. So tell her to be
ready and not to make me regret it.”

“Oh yeah right” Ashlyn chuckled and rolled her eyes at her best friend. “you’re welcome.”

Whitney had come clean with the keeper after her meeting with the coach and endured Ashlyn’s
frustration and then gratitude when she heard what they had done. It had turned into a joke
between them anytime either of them did something dumb or wrong.

“Uh oh, don’t make me go tell coach to bench you now...”

That afternoon at Whitney’s house they laughed about it again and then were quiet for a few
minutes as they finished their lunches.

“You know we’re going to win that game for you, right?” Ashlyn glanced at the defender out of
the corner of her eye. “So, like, think about what you want to do after we win. Plan out your victory
lap and celebration dance or whatever. Practice your speech for when they stick the mike in your
“I’m sorry I’m leaving you Ash” Whitney said softly and turned her body a little so she was facing her best friend. “It’s ok if you’re mad at me, or disappointed in me for walking away. I get it.” She paused for a minute and watched Ashlyn finish chewing the food in her mouth. “I’d be mad too if you were the one leaving me.”

“I’m not mad Whit, not even a little bit” the keeper explained, turning her body too and smiling softly at her best friend. “I’m sad. Just...fucking sad. It’s been a really shitty year for me losing pieces of you out of my daily life” she chuckled and tried not to cry. “The house still doesn’t feel right without you there. Ali says so too” she admitted and looked down at her lap for a minute. “But I’m trying really hard not to look at what I’m losing or have already lost. I have to remember to look at how lucky I was to have you as a roommate and a teammate for so long in the first place. Focus on the good and the special and the lucky and not on the sad.”

“That sounds like a pretty neat trick” Whitney said, trying to smile but not really succeeding. “Let me know when you figure out how to do it and then teach me, ok?”

Deb and Kyle and Nathan travelled to Boston for the Championship weekend. They all arrived Friday afternoon or evening and descended on the big old house for a celebratory meal with their favorite keeper. Tammye and Carol had come for the whole week, spending the second of Tammye’s two vacation weeks in New England to take in the beautiful fall foliage season, or what was left of it, as well. They took the front bedroom, Kyle and Nathan took the guest room and Deb slept in the twin bed in Whitney’s old room. Whitney’s parents had been in Boston all week, not wanting to miss a minute of their daughter’s last professional soccer experience. Her brother was even flying in on Saturday morning so he could be there for the big game too. It was a big fucking deal and everybody knew it.

Ali, swamped herself that week with K-H duties as well as her annual networking endeavors, was worried that there were too many people in the house for Ashlyn to be able to relax and get focused. But the brunette was reminded that week, again, how her wife had changed over the last year and a half. Taking Drew and the dogs for a walk with her mom provided more relaxation for her keeper than she would have thought possible. Watching Deb give him a bath and read him his books and then put him to bed relieved more stress than a lot of other things might have. Facetiming with Meg or Chris and Beth or her dad brought a huge smile to her face that Ali knew she felt all the way through her body. And it was a good thing there were others there for the blonde, because Ali and Ashlyn barely saw each other at all that week. The brunette and K-H hosted a different dinner or cocktail hour the first four nights of the week, starting on Sunday. She had just completed her first month of pregnancy and she had the same old debilitating morning sickness as the last time. So she got a late start to her day and had to spend all afternoon and most of the evening catching up and networking and taking care of their clients and players and their families who were in town. Then when she got home she was so exhausted that she fell right to sleep, even though she tried desperately to stay awake long enough to touch base with her wife about how her day had gone.

Thursday afternoon she called Marcy into her office and told her she was going home and to call her or text her whenever she needed her. Ali had confided in the young Executive Assistant about her pregnancy just in case something like this came up. She had explained, without going into too many details or crossing any lines, that she would be working from home in the mornings for the first three months of her pregnancy because of her morning sickness. That Thursday afternoon she was honest again.

“I’m exhausted and I haven’t seen my wife all week. I need to make sure she’s ok too. What kind
of awful agent would I be if I didn’t take care of my very first client?” she joked.

She texted her wife and told her she was making dinner that night and that she couldn’t wait to see her at home. After they had dinnertime with Tammye, Carol and Drew, enjoying Ashlyn’s favorite sautéed chicken and asparagus meal, Ali led her wife by the hand up the backstairs while Tammye and Carol gave Drew his bath and put him to bed.

“I’m so glad you’re home tonight honey” Ashlyn said from her position laying across the foot of their bed as Ali gave her a relaxing massage. “I’ve been worried about you all week. You must be so tired.”

Ali leaned over and kissed her cheek sweetly.

“I’m ok Ash. I’m tired but doing just fine.” She put her hands back to work on her wife’s lower back, using some techniques that Dani and Dom had taught her to try and avoid another back spasm incident. “Hosting Championship Week doesn’t happen every day and it’s all hands on deck at the office. But everything’s going well so far. I think we’re going to get a lot of new clients too. But I don’t want to talk about work now babe. I want to know how you’re doing and where your head’s at. What’s going on with you, my love?”

They spent the next several minutes talking about how sad the keeper was to be losing her best friend and teammate. And that it was extra hard because she was already sad about Whitney moving out that year. And now, lately, she was sad about the inevitability of losing her starting spot on the team that she had had such a big part in building up.

“It’s just a lot, all at once, you know?” she asked rhetorically. “I mean, I know I’ve had a year to get used to the idea of Whit retiring, and it’s been ten months since she moved out...but it still feels like it’s all happening at the exact same time and it’s scary as hell.”

Her honesty moved the brunette, as it always did. Ali could feel the tension coursing through her keeper’s body. All her muscles were tight and even her face looked anxious while she was getting the soothing massage.

“And to have two of them happen at the same time would be really hard. Somehow you’re getting stuck with all three and it fucking sucks and it’s not fair – especially the not starting part - and I don’t know how you’re holding yourself together. Honestly Ashlyn, I’m so proud of you.”

Ali was angry for her wife. She hadn’t seen the blonde get really, truly irate about losing her starting spot yet, but she was mad enough for the both of them. Fuck US Soccer! What had they ever done for her wife except kick her to the curb after she got injured. Fuckers. And now, after she clawed and fought her way to a great career in the NWSL and was one of the very best keepers in the league and easily one of the most popular, now they were going to screw her out of her starting spot so their #2 keeper could get more starts? Man, the brunette was furious. She had only vented to Sydney and her father and she was trying very hard to keep her fury away from Ashlyn. If her wife was somehow managing to keep her anger in check she didn’t want to be the one to push her over the edge, especially not that week while she was putting so much pressure on herself to win the Championship for Whitney.

The other thing that they were both afraid of, but were conveniently not talking about yet, was Ali’s pregnancy. Sydney’s miscarriage was fresh in both their minds and it terrified them. The week after the Chicago playoff win Ali and Ashlyn went to see Dr. Comello for the first, four-week, appointment. Most pregnant women waited until six or even eight weeks to see their ob/gyn but Ali had gone at four weeks last time she was pregnant and she wasn’t going to tempt fate this
time. Patty walked them through the basics as if they hadn’t been through the drill already and they all laughed as she joked about how easy it was going to be. Ali explained that she had just started suffering from morning sickness that week which was a little earlier than it had been with Drew. She was nervous that it meant something was wrong or different about this pregnancy. The doctor could see the worry creased across both women’s faces.

“Listen you two” she stated matter-of-factly, but with a warm smile. “I know you’re worried about what happened with Sydney. I would be too if I were in your shoes. But I’m telling you there was nothing that she did or didn’t do that made that happen. There was nothing she could have done to prevent it from happening. Miscarriages happen sometimes and that’s all there is to it.”

Ashlyn squeezed her wife’s hand as they listened nervously and intently.

“Now I am going to tell you something that will impact your pregnancy and that’s stress. Don’t do it guys. Just don’t get sucked into those irrational fears. Ali, you’re a worrier to begin with and you did a great job last time managing that, at least as far as I could tell.” She looked at Ashlyn for confirmation, raising her eyebrows a bit as she waited for a response.

“I’ll never tell...” the keeper teased, trying to lighten the mood a little bit. When Ali gave her a dirty look the keeper chuckled and kissed the side of her head. “I’m just kidding. She did great. She really did.”

Ali smiled a little and looked at the doctor who knew her so well.

“Patty, I’m so scared...” she stopped as her emotions choked the words in her throat.

“I know kiddo” the doctor patted her patient’s knee and left her hand there for a minute. “But you’re so strong and you can do this. It’s all about the power of positive thinking sometimes, and this is one of those times. Don’t let your fears knock you off track. Stay optimistic and believe in yourself and your body and keep thinking positive thoughts. It’s better for you and it will be so much better for your baby.”

Ali reached down and clasped Patty’s hand, still on her knee. She squeezed it and smiled back through a few tears that had collected in the corners of her cinnamon eyes.

“Thanks” she said in a small voice as she sniffled. “I’ll try my best. I really will.”

“I know you will. That’s why I know you and your baby are going to do just great.”

Three nights later they climbed into bed, gleefully talking about the cute Halloween costumes they had seen at their door earlier that evening and how adorable Drew had been as he greeted the trick or treaters in his cow costume. Ashlyn couldn’t lie, she was a little embarrassed at how lame the cow costume was, but it was what Drew wanted. He had pitched a fit when they both tried to get him to explore other options. He was adamant about dressing up as a cow. Ali thought it was because of the petting zoo they had recently visited, but also thought it could be just because he really loved making the moo sound of a cow. It had been the first animal sound he ever made and he giggled every single time he did it. Their conversation that night turned to some of the scarier costumes they had seen on the older kids and Ashlyn rattled off a few of the best ones as Ali snuggled into her side.

“And that headless horseman one was amazing, don’t you think? The way they painted the head to make it look so real with all the blood and veins and everything” Ashlyn enthused.

It took her another few minutes to realize that her wife hadn’t replied or participated in the scary
part of the conversation. The keeper turned her head to look at Ali and felt her shoulders start to shake under her arm.

“Ali, what’s wrong honey?” she asked quickly, squeezing the brunette’s shoulders in her strong arm and hugging her with her other arm.

But Ali didn’t answer for a few minutes. She sniffled and fought her tears before they finally came. She cried and her shoulders shook as she held onto Ashlyn tightly. The keeper pressed kisses into the top of her head and hugged her, trying to soothe her until she was ready to talk.

“It’s ok baby. Everything’s ok. I’ve got you Al. I love you so much...”

Finally the tears slowed and the shaking stopped and the breathing returned almost to normal.

“What’s going on?” Ashlyn asked softly after a few minutes more.

“Oh God Ashlyn, I’m just so scared. I’ve been trying to be strong and not let it get to me, but...”

“I’m scared too sweetheart” the blonde admitted quietly.

“I think we just need to...to cry about it with each other when it gets too hard to be strong. Can we do that?” Ali pleaded as she tilted her head up to look at her wife’s concerned face.

“Yeah, that’s what we’ll do Al.” Ashlyn met her wife’s red, puffy eyes and gave her a small smile. “We’ll stay strong and brave as long as we can, and then, when we can’t do it anymore, we’ll cry it out and get rid of it. Fuck you fear.”

“I’m sorry honey” Ali apologized as she wiped the tears off of her own face. “I know you have a lot going on right now and the last thing you need is some idiotic, fragile wife who can’t keep her shit together...”

“Hey, look at me” the keeper commanded gently as Ali tried to drop her eyes again. She smiled and tilted her head a bit to the side once the brunette lifted her eyes up. Ashlyn cupped her face and caressed her cheek as she looked into those whiskey-colored eyes. “I don’t care what else is going on in this crazy world. You and that baby and Drew are the most important things to me and don’t you ever forget that. Nothing else even comes close. So when you feel like you can’t be brave anymore you just come tell me and we’ll purge it, we’ll cry it out or scream it out or dance it out or whatever it takes so that you can be brave again for the baby. Ok?”

“I love you so much Ashlyn...”

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When Saturday, November 7th finally rolled around, the city of Boston’s soccer fans were in a frenzy of excitement. Bob Kraft had pulled out all the stops and advertised the hell out of Championship Week and the stadium was packed to the gills. The pre-game ceremony took forever but it always did for the Championship game. The Breakers introduced their three Pillars of Excellence winners that could be there that day and had them come out for the coin toss. The crowd loved it. Many of the fans didn’t know much about the previous incarnations of the Breakers and it was a good way to blend the old with the new. The halftime entertainment was a couple of soccer challenges with all three of those retired Breakers, Angela Hucles, Kristine Lilly and Leslie Osborne, competing along with a couple of Revolution players and even a couple of Patriot players. Julian Edelman, as always, was the biggest name and had been happy to participate.

The game itself wasn’t even that close. After all of the nerves and anxiety that lived and breathed
in the Breakers facility and stadium for those two weeks, the game was barely even a contest. Part of it was that the Orlando Pride hadn’t been to the big game before and were a little uncomfortable. Most of their key players were younger and played pretty tight throughout the whole game. Part of it was that the Breakers were a really excellent team that played well under pressure and had strong leadership to keep them on track if anybody started to waver. Their nerves kept them out of sync for almost the first twenty minutes of the game, but then they settled down. It took a laser shot from Marta just outside the 18 to get everybody’s attention. The ball screamed past Angela Salem, who almost got a foot on it, and then had Megan Oyster frozen stiff as it whizzed by her. It only stopped when Ashlyn Harris made an incredibly athletic dive, completely stretched out all the way to the far post, and batted it away. But it hadn’t gone out of bounds. Whitney made the final clearance, booting it up the pitch and out of bounds near midfield. That one ball had woken the sleeping giant and the Breakers never looked back.

They were up 2-0 at halftime on goals scored by Tasha Dowie and Rose Lavelle and went into the locker room to regroup. The second half played much as the first half had except the Pride was forced to play more aggressively because they were in the hole. That opened up more opportunities for the Breakers and they took advantage of their chances. Kristie Mewis scored next and then Rosie White put the icing on the cake with their fourth goal. There were only a few minutes left and Ashlyn got so excited at the prospect of getting a clean sheet for her best friend in her very last game that she almost started to cry right there on the pitch. Orlando was a good young team but they just weren’t good enough. Marta was a magician, setting up her teammates and sending crosses back and forth through the box all game long. But nobody ever seemed to be there for her to finish. Ashlyn made several nice stops when they were able to get on the end of one of the Brazilian’s nice balls in. The only real lapse the Breakers had came right at the end when it was obvious the team was letting themselves believe they might have done the impossible – win the Supporters Shield on their home pitch and then win the Championship game on their home pitch as well. In the blink of an eye one of Orlando’s young strikers got her foot on a pass through midfield. She beat Angela Salem and then moved to the right and took on Christen Westphal. Ashlyn swallowed hard when she looked up and saw Marta racing towards her down the middle of the pitch, hand outstretched and calling for the ball. Whitney had been higher up the pitch starting the previous play and Megan Oyster was the only defender in front of Ashlyn now. The keeper screamed at her to take Marta and stay with her no matter what. Ashlyn knew the best way to beat Marta was to keep the ball away from her. If she had to go one on one with somebody she would much rather it be the young striker than the 5-time player of the year. The striker just managed to get a cross off that Westphal missed by an inch. The ball flew towards the middle of the box, just outside the 6 and about three feet off the pitch. Oyster, even though Ashlyn had told her to stick with Marta, had drifted towards the younger striker just a little bit when it looked like she was going to beat Westphal. That extra two feet of space between Oyster and Marta was impossible to make up in the split second that the defender had and she knew she had fucked up.

“Fuck!!” Oyster screamed in frustration as she watched the ball connect with Marta’s left foot as the Brazilian leapt in the air to meet the cross.

There wasn’t much that Ashlyn could do about it. A ball like that, struck off of Marta’s left foot from the 6? That was going in on just about every goalkeeper who had ever played the beautiful game.

The final score was 4-1 when the ref blew her whistle a few minutes later after stoppage time. The anger Ashlyn felt at the late goal evaporated quickly as sheer euphoria swept through the sold-out stadium. For the first time in the history of the NWSL the same team won the Supporters Shield and the Championship. They had done it and it felt like nothing else the keeper had ever experienced. She never dreamed that winning a championship in her home stadium could feel that much better than winning it at a neutral site. But it did. It was like night and day. It was
unfuckingbelievable.

For some reason it took a long time for Ashlyn to find and hug Whitney. Everybody was watching for it because, if they hadn’t already known how close the two teammates were, the special interview Lifetime TV did with the two that aired during the pregame show told everybody to watch for it. When they finally did get to each other, half way between the 18 and the midfield stripe, the grins on their tear and sweat-streaked faces got even bigger than they already had been. They hugged for a few minutes as the cameras closed in on them and Ashlyn leaned back, picked her best friend up and spun her around a few times as they both laughed. It was one of the purest moments all season and anybody watching it couldn’t help but feel some of the joy they were splashing all over the place.

“We did it! We did it!” Ashlyn exclaimed loudly after putting her back on the ground.

“We sure did” Whitney replied as she released the keeper from their hug. They stood side by side, arm in arm and surveyed the scene around them for a minute, cameras still rolling. “I can’t believe it. It’s too good to be true.”

Ashlyn looked over at the defender when she heard her words and then smiled as she fought her emotions. She thought of how hard Whitney had worked to make this team a winner. It was a lot easier to do that the last few years, but what meant the most to the keeper as she thought about it was the way Whitney fought for the team back in 2015 and 2016 when nobody else seemed to be willing to. She took a sad, pathetic group of players and molded them, with the help of a few other teammates, into a tight-knit team. Into a family. It had been Whitney’s efforts, right down to something that some professionals thought was silly, the team dinner, that had pushed this team to achieve and sustain excellence over the years. There had been lots of changes. New players joined the team, new assistant coaches joined the team, new rules were put in place by the league, new practice facilities, new stadium, new ownership group, so much new every single season. The only true constant was Whitney and the way she led the players through every single change that came their way. It was powerful and moving that Whitney Engen was the person in Ashlyn’s life who truly epitomized the words she had just used – too good to be true. Ashlyn held her breath for a second to try and get the words to come out strong enough for her best friend to hear and understand them.

“No, you are Whit.”
Forgiveness

In the blink of an eye it was Thanksgiving again. Hadn’t they just celebrated turkey day a few weeks ago? It certainly felt that way to both Ashlyn and Ali. The excitement and exhilaration of the Championship game lingered into the second week of November as the Breakers’ players and staff finished their year-end obligations, tests, treatments and meetings. There was no year-end team party because they had partied hard and long as they celebrated their incredible victory after the big game. It had been a crazy party. The locker room celebration had been a lot of fun but then they moved to one of the large conference rooms of a hotel a few blocks away for the official party. Everybody got wrecked, even Whitney and Tasha who always seemed to be in control, even after she drank a lot. Family members were welcome to stay and many did, including Ali and Ryan and most of the significant others of the players. But many others did not. Tammye and Carol took Drew back to Gloucester for the night and told his moms to have a great time and not worry about him until the next day sometime. Ali wasn’t drinking and wasn’t going to stay because she didn’t want to have to lie to everybody about why she was staying so sober. But one look at her wife’s sad face as she started to gather her things and leave shook her resolve.

“Just tell them you need to stay sober for work” Ashlyn suggested, her voice a cute, drunk, slur. “I don’t want you to leave me” she pouted, sticking her bottom lip out and frowning as she wrapped the brunette up in a hug.

“Well you’re not wrong” Ali agreed with a soft smile as she kissed her keeper’s lips. “Even if I could drink I wouldn’t go crazy tonight, for that very reason.”

“You’re so professional” the blonde complimented, stumbling over the ‘s’s with her thick tongue. “And pretty. You’re so pretty Ali” she added sweetly, dimple appearing as she grinned at her wife. “I love you.”

Half the team ended up staying at the hotel that night in various stages of drunkenness. Ashlyn was hungover as she blinked her eyes open just before 11am. She didn’t know where she was or what day it was or what time it was. She felt the warm spot in the bed where her wife had just been and frowned. She tried to get her mind to work as she tentatively stretched her sore, inebriated muscles out. She was just starting to focus in on some of the facts when she heard a horrible wretching sound coming from the bathroom. Right. Ali’s morning sickness, her final bout of the morning right on schedule at 11am. The keeper tried to get up so she could go help her wife but as she sat up her own stomach lurched and a strong feeling of queasiness swept over her, making her sweat.

“Oh shit” she said to herself as she ran to the bathroom, hoping Ali was done puking her guts out.

They took turns throwing up in the toilet for a few minutes until Ali grabbed the trash can and escaped the bathroom altogether. She turned the tv on loud so she wouldn’t hear the blonde emptying her stomach. It would turn into one of those moments that they would remember and mention for the rest of their lives whenever one of them drank too much.

“Remember that time I ran you out of the bathroom when you were pregnant? God that was awful. Don’t ever let me do that again.”

The third week in November was a terrific respite from the flurry of the season and the playoffs and everything Breakers related. Thanksgiving was still a week away and Whitney and Ashlyn and Drew hung out a lot. They spent time at the big old house, and at Whitney’s house and at the Children’s Museum in Boston and had a relaxing and fun week that felt like vacation. For the first time, Ashlyn started to get a feel for what life might be like after Whitney retired. She was
encouraged by the idea that they could spend time together whenever they wanted. Whitney’s schedule would get very busy once she started classes in January but Ashlyn’s would be much more open then so they could make it work. And Whitney’s course-load would be much lighter during the summer break so she would be able to work around the Breakers schedule for her bestie.

“Did you really think I was going to just disappear from your life?” the defender asked one afternoon as they walked Drew and the dogs to the park several blocks from Ashlyn’s house.

“Well, yeah, kind of. I guess” the keeper replied sheepishly. “I don’t know.”

“This is going to be new for us Ash, but I know we can do it” Whitney smiled and nudged her best friend with her shoulder. “We just have to learn how to make time for each other. We’ve never lived in the same place and not seen each other every day for soccer, or not lived together before. It’s either long-distance or roomies” she chuckled.

“You’re right” Ashlyn nodded as she started to process what she was hearing.

“We can see each other as much as you and Niki see each other...”

“No way” she shook her head firmly. “That’s not enough. They’ve got two kids and I hardly see her anymore.”

“Oh, I thought you guys hung out more than that.” Whitney frowned as they got to the park and then grinned as Drew got excited and started jumping up and down to get inside the gate. “Don’t worry. We’ll figure something out.”

They spent an hour playing in the park with the 18-month old, carefully keeping the dogs away from any other kids who seemed to be afraid of them. Drew was teething again, his first molars which were supposed to be some of the most painful to cut in, and he had been a nightmare earlier in the day. His cheeks were still red from his crying as well as his teething. But the park had been a success and he had laughed and played the whole time. As they started the walk home, at a little brisker pace as the sunlight faded and the air chilled, Ashlyn’s face lit up and she hopped along sideways so she could look at Whitney as she told her the great idea.

“I know! Why don’t we do something like Ali and Syd do?! That always worked great for them. They used to see each other every Wednesday night and they just knew not to plan anything else on that night. If something ever came up then they would move it around if they had to” she explained with a big grin as if Whitney hadn’t lived with Ali for almost four years.

The defender laughed at Ashlyn and shook her head. She had been expecting to make that sort of arrangement all along but was so touched by the keeper’s enthusiasm that she couldn’t bring herself to tell her.

“That’s a great idea” she nodded and smiled instead. “Once I get my course schedule I’ll be able to plan something out with you, at least for the first semester” she agreed. “We’ll just adjust it as we need to.”

Ashlyn smiled but was quiet for the rest of the walk home. Both women listened to Drew’s adorable commentary as he talked to the dogs and the birds and the wind. As they turned up the driveway the keeper turned her head and stared at Whitney until she finally turned to meet her eyes with a questioning look.

“I know this probably seems silly, this scheduling time to get together...like we’re dating or something” she looked down, embarrassed and blushing a little bit. “But you’re really important to
me Whit. I don’t ever want to lose touch with you. I don’t ever want to feel like a guest in your house, or you in mine. I don’t ever want my son to see you and not run to you and feel comfortable with you on sight. I’m not willing to give up any of those things and I’ll do whatever I have to…”

“Me too Ash” Whitney interrupted and smiled at her, tilting her head a little bit to the side. “Me too.”

Thanksgiving at Ken’s, the following week, was a wet and rainy day that put a damper on a lot of the fun Krieger traditions they liked to enjoy. A little bit of rain wouldn’t have stopped them, but the steady, heavy rain that fell all day long did. For the first time in years, there was no soccer game in the backyard. Even the year Ali and Ashlyn had hosted Thanksgiving they played soccer in the backyard. People looked forward to it and brought extra clothes to change into for the game. Everyone was disappointed, even the Scott Kriegers who were usually the least excited about playing soccer on the holiday. But those New Hampshire Kriegers were thrilled in general with two new babies in the family. Both Rachael and Vivian had given birth that year to two more little girls. Little Allie was nine years old and the only big kid among the toddlers and babies.

The Dwyers and Sandi Leroux were all there as were Kyle and Nathan who had taken the whole week off and driven up with Luna. Ali teased her big brother about taking a vacation with his handsome boyfriend and spending it with family. He had given her a hard time about that her entire life and she loved being able to pay him back. What should have been a torturous afternoon and evening with two babies, two toddlers, a nine-year old, four dogs, one puppy, and twenty-four or so grown-ups jammed into one house turned out to be one of their best Thanksgivings ever. Everybody was in a really good mood for a bunch of different reasons and that’s what had done the trick. Kyle, Nathan, Ali and Ashlyn talked about it as they drove back to the big old house that night with Drew dozing in the carseat between his two uncles. They had been trying to describe why it had been so fun and easy to be with everybody for so long.

“It was like everyone was the perfect amount and kind of drunk” Ashlyn offered from the driver’s seat, voice raised over the still-pouring rain and the windshield wipers.

Ali chuckled from the passenger seat and turned halfway around to look at the reactions from the backseat.

“No” Kyle shook his head with a small smile, “not even.” He glanced at Nathan and his sister as if gauging how much crap he was going to get from them if he said his next sentence. “It was like everybody got laid this morning and showed up all blissed out to stuff themselves with turkey…” he paused until there was a lull in the groans from the others, “not even showered, still smelling like sex and wearing not enough clothes” he giggled and then laughed out loud, pleased with himself for all of the complaining coming from his truckmates.

“Gross Kyle” Ashlyn whined and screwed her face up into a look of complete disgust. “Now I’m thinking about Aunt Becky and Uncle Scott getting busy and I think I’m going to throw up.”

“You’re terrible!” Nathan complained loudly but winked at his boyfriend as he laughed.

“Really Ky?” Ali gasped and looked shocked. “Your own father? And the children? What about the children Kyle?!” she raised her voice a bit, pretending to be even more upset.

“Oh please” the trouble-maker laughed. “All those children are going to have sex someday” he added gleefully, loving the discomfort he was causing. “Hot, sweaty, dirty, nasty sex…”

“You shut your mouth right now!” Ashlyn said, her horrified face glaring at her brother-in-law through the rear-view mirror. “Not my baby boy. He’s a sweet angel who will stay pure forever.”
Even Ali had to laugh when she heard her wife’s ridiculous statement.

“You’re not serious!” Kyle laughed again, honestly not sure if the keeper could be that delusional.

“I certainly am” she answered defiantly. “He’s never growing up and he’s never having ‘sex’,” she whispered the word ‘sex’, “and he’s never going to leave me.”

“Aww, honey” Ali reached over and squeezed her wife’s thigh. “You’re so sweet, and so wrong, but so so sweet.”

Kyle and Nathan helped them put up their Christmas tree and decorations over the next two days and when they were all up and everyone had relaxed late Saturday afternoon the two men got up off the living room couch and stood in front of the tv. They looked nervous but happy and Ali furrowed her brow as she tried to figure out what was going on. She glanced down at Ashlyn who was sitting on the floor playing with Drew, looking just as confused.

“So, um, we have some news” Kyle started as he met Nathan’s eyes and giggled nervously.

“We wanted you guys to be the first to know, because, well, you’ve just always believed in us” Nathan stammered as he flubbed the little speech he had prepared. “And I’m not sure we’d be making this announcement without you...”

“Oh my God...” Ali breathed out as her heart leapt out of her chest and her nose-crinkling smile spread across her face.

“You’re kind of giving it away hon” Kyle interjected with a giggle as he squeezed Nathan’s hand.

“What’s happening?” Ashlyn asked, still confused, as Persey got up and walked over to Ali with her tail wagging at the brunette’s excitement.

“Oh shit, I am, aren’t I?” Nathan laughed. “Well, there’s a reason he’s the one on camera all the time and not me” he chuckled as he leaned against Kyle and blushed a little.

“Oh my God!” Ali said again, much louder and with much excitement.

“What did I miss?” the blonde whined.

“We’re getting married” Kyle announced with a squeal as he gave his fiancé a quick kiss. He barely had time to turn his head back before Ali launched herself at him.

“Oh my God you guys!” she squealed as she hugged her brother tightly. She quickly reached over and pulled Nathan into the hug, sandwiching herself between the two men and squeezing. “I’m so happy for you both.”

All the dogs were up now, pacing around and trying to figure out what the new game was. Ashlyn stood up and gave her own congratulatory hugs. Drew clapped his hands when he saw Ali’s happy face as she picked him up and brought him over to give his tiny well-wishes too.

“So when did this happen? How? Who did what?” the brunette demanded breathlessly as they all sat back down.

“I proposed last night” Nathan grinned and squeezed Kyle’s hand as he held it.

“And I said yes!” Kyle beamed.

“That much we got” Ashlyn chuckled and gently punched him in the shoulder.
They spent several minutes listening to both men describe, sometimes at the same time, how
Nathan had asked Kyle to take a walk with him when they had driven back to the big old house
after dinner out with friends in Boston the night before. They walked down to Good Harbor beach
and, when the moment was right, Nathan got down on one knee in the sand and asked Kyle to
spend the rest of his life with him and be his husband.

“We’re getting ring finger tattoos in a couple of weeks” Kyle explained excitedly. “They’ll be our
engagement rings and then we’ll get wedding bands on our big day.”

Ali was so happy she could barely breathe. She had talked with her brother many times about
putting a ring on it but he was always too afraid to do it. He had a serious self-confidence problem
when it came to love and she worried that he would never feel worthy of another man’s heart. She
sat there and looked at the happy couple on her couch with complete adoration in her eyes.

“So when is the big day? Have you made plans yet?” Ashlyn asked, surprised her wife hadn’t
already jumped down that road of questioning.

“We’re not sure yet” Nathan answered. “We don’t want to mess up his film school schedule...”

“And we don’t want to wait forever either...”

“That means next summer” Ali’s brain computed quickly.

“Yes. That’s what we’re thinking” Kyle grinned back at her. “Probably at the end of the summer
but we’ll have to see what we can do. We’re just getting started on the plans.”

“Well, if you need any help with anything...”

“We know sissy” Kyle smiled again. “We feel like you’ve already done so much to help us. And I
don’t just mean talking me down when I get stupid and crazy” he giggled. “Thank you both for
always being so supportive of us and believing in us, even when we weren’t sure of ourselves.”

“You guys” she said softly, fighting the tears that were trying to escape. She took a deep breath to
steady herself and her hormones that were already starting to get unruly in her 8th week of
pregnancy. “I’ve just always known you two were made for each other. As hokey as that sounds”
she rolled her eyes and smiled at them. “Thanks for proving me right” she winked.

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“You’re sure you don’t mind honey?” Tammye asked her daughter through the phone one last time
at the beginning of December.

“Of course not mom. We’d love it if you guys came up for Christmas. That would be awesome.
Drew’s ten times as cute this year as he was last year, hard to imagine, I know” she cheesed and
laughed along with her mom. “He’ll be so excited. We all will be” she answered honestly.

Tammye and Carol had enjoyed their New England Christmas so much last year that they wanted
to come up again. Tammye had already used her two weeks of vacation, one week in the summer,
and then the other for the Championship game the first week in November, but she was taking a
third week as unpaid time off and couldn’t have been happier about it. Experiencing the beauty of
Christmas at the big old house and sharing the fun traditions with Drew was something rare and
special for them. Ali and Ashlyn made the rest of their plans accordingly and before they knew it,
they were welcoming Tammye and Carol with hugs and kisses. Christmas was on Friday that year
and GiGi and Caro, as Drew called them, arrived the Sunday before so they could spend the whole
week. They would fly back to Florida the following Sunday, 12-27, with Ashlyn, Ali and Drew as
The young family started their two-week vacation in the sunshine state.

The week of Christmas was also Ali’s 12-week appointment with Dr. Comello. She clutched Ashlyn’s hand that Tuesday morning and held her breath for what felt like an eternity. The brunette was about to scream in fear and frustration when she finally heard a rhythmic ‘thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump’.

“There it is” Patty grinned as the baby’s heartbeat filled the room.

“Oh thank God” Ashlyn breathed out and leaned against the exam table to steady herself.

The blonde smiled weakly at her wife as they exchanged silent relief and gratitude. For the first time, Ali understood just how frightened her brave keeper had been too. She had been so strong for the brunette’s sake that Ali had believed the façade. She felt guilty and incredibly blessed at the same time.

“Everything looks good and that is the sound of a strong and healthy baby growing inside you Mrs. Krieger” the doctor announced after she examined the brunette, patting her leg reassuringly.

“Thank you Patty” Ali beamed. “Thank you God” she rested her head back and closed her eyes for a second.

Ashlyn leaned down and kissed her forehead.

“Great job honey” she whispered, her lips still close to Ali’s skin.

Ali wanted to thank her strong wife for being her rock for the past two months but she knew she wouldn’t be able to do it without bursting into tears and she didn’t want to do that in front of Dr. Comello. She squeezed her hand and batted her eyes at her amazing keeper and willed her to know how very grateful she was.

The week before, the Crosses, Dwyers and Kriegers had visited Santa together again, deciding to make it an annual tradition if at all possible. Whitney and Ryan joined them this year and that made the day even better. They were doing what Ali and Ashlyn had done earlier in their relationship – staying at home, by themselves, for Christmas. They had gone to Whitney’s family in California last year and they had just spent Thanksgiving in Long Island with Ryan’s family last month so they felt like the time was right. Of course, they were invited to all of the Christmas festivities the Kriegers were participating in and they planned to join them for Christmas Eve at the big old house at least.

“Hi sugar plum” Ashlyn said sweetly as she carried the grocery bags into the kitchen from the mudroom and set them on the counter. She walked over to the small kitchen table where Ali sat looking at the many Christmas cards they had received so far that December. “Whatcha doing?” she asked as she leaned down for a kiss.

Ali smiled and brought their lips together softly, humming into the kiss.

“Mmmmmm, I’m glad you’re home.”

“Me too baby” the keeper smiled back and stole another kiss before returning to the car for the rest of the groceries.

Ali continued looking through the cards and answered her wife when she came back into the kitchen a few minutes later.
“I feel like I missed so many things this year, don’t you?” she asked, pensively.

“Like what?” Ashlyn furrowed her brow as she put groceries away in the kitchen and pantry.

“Well Erica got married in February and Kristie got married during the Olympic break...”

“Honey, we went to both those weddings. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten your show-stopping karaoke performance with Syd at Kristie’s reception. That’s on video somewhere...”

“Yes, yeah, ok” Ali rolled her eyes and smiled. Kristie Mewis had married her finance guy in the middle of August and Ashlyn had just made it home from her Olympic duties in Connecticut in time to be there. “Maybe it just feels like I’m losing touch with people then. When was the last time we had Erica and Tom over?”

“So let’s invite them over for dinner” the keeper suggested, not picking up the subtle cues her wife was giving her.

“Ash, I know we can invite them to dinner...” her voice was frustrated.

“Oh, am I not supposed to be trying to help solve things right now?” she asked innocently, walking out of the pantry with a box of cheerios in her hand to look at her beautiful brunette. “I’m sorry Al.”

“Heather got engaged and I don’t know half the people who are going to her bachelorette party. And look at this one” she held out the Christmas card from Hannah, Dev and Meg so Ashlyn could see it.

“Ok, I see it” the blonde replied tentatively.

“Well would you recognize the house if Meg wasn’t in the picture? Did we send them a housewarming gift or a card? Does Meg like living in that big, fancy house with all the brass fixtures everywhere or does she miss her old room in the apartment?” Ali’s words were coming quickly as she started to get carried away by whatever emotions were pulling at her in that particular moment. “I think Carm and Kacey are going to get engaged next...thank God Jessie and Liz haven’t made any major life changes...my Liz I mean. What about your Liz though? Is she ever going to dump that loser she’s been putting up with since high school and go be her own, awesome woman?”

“Hey baby, slow down” Ashlyn put the box of cheerios on the kitchen table, on top of the Christmas cards which seemed to be some sort of trigger for the emotional rampage the brunette had embarked upon, and knelt down beside her wife. “It’s ok” she slowly rubbed her hands on Ali’s thigh and arm to try and get her to simmer down.

“I just feel like I’m missing everything” the brunette explained again, weakly, as she met her keeper’s eyes.

Ashlyn saw her bottom lip start to tremble and knew she was going to cry.

“Sweetheart” she cooed and hugged her wife as Ali turned her body sideways in the chair and burst into tears. “Everything’s ok. You’re not missing anything, not anything really important anyway. I promise” she soothed as she rubbed the brunette’s back for several minutes while the tears fell. She decided to answer the brunette’s questions while she comforted her, hoping the information might help. “No I wouldn’t recognize Dev’s new house without Meg in the picture, although now that you’ve pointed out all the brass everywhere, maybe I will next time” she chuckled quietly and took a beat. “Yes, we sent them a big bouquet of flowers with a housewarming card. I know that for a fact. And Meg likes the new house, especially the pool and the game room and all of the fun
extras. But she misses the neighbors from the apartment building. She spent her whole life sharing the halls and elevators and lobby and laundry room with some of them and she really misses them.”

“Did she tell you that?” Ali’s voice was small and she sniffled, her head leaning against Ashlyn’s strong shoulder.

“Kind of. She couldn’t explain it all to me like that, but between what she said and what Hannah told me, we figured it out.” Ashlyn kissed the brunette’s neck and gave her a little squeeze before caressing her back some more. “And my Liz, geez, I don’t know if she’ll ever be able to move on from Tony. She loves him, you know?” The keeper pulled back to try and look at Ali’s face. “I don’t like him either and she deserves way better but I can’t just tell her that. I’ll keep working on her and maybe someday soon she’ll believe it herself and I won’t have to tell her.”

“She’s awesome and he’s such a jerk” Ali leaned back and wiped some of the tears off of her face.

“And I think you’re right about Carm and Kacey” the blonde continued as they both straightened up a bit. She put her hands back on Ali’s thighs and massaged them and her hips with her strong hands as she spoke. “Hilary says Kacey’s never been happier and all the girls on the team know it’s because she’s madly in love with Carm. She even learned all the hockey rules for her…”

“Carm hates hockey” Ali interrupted with a giggle. “The one boy in high school she thought she really loved was a hockey player and when he dumped her she dumped the whole damned sport.”

“Well she doesn’t hate it anymore” Ashlyn chuckled. “I think it’s pretty cool that she found love again with a hockey player. This time one with boobs though.”

They both laughed and Ashlyn exhaled a sigh of relief when she saw the smile return to her wife’s pretty face.

“Our life moves fast these days” Ashlyn leaned forward and kissed her cheek. “And it’s only going to get faster once the baby comes.” Ali visibly tensed and the keeper kicked herself when she saw the brunette’s jaw set. She shouldn’t have mentioned the baby until she had talked Ali off of the current emotional ledge she was on. “But here’s the thing – that’s how it’s supposed to be. You’re doing exactly what you’re supposed to be doing Al. You may not know what Heather had for lunch today because you two don’t work together anymore, but you know what Drew had for lunch today. You’re not texting 24/7 with Jessie anymore but you’re keeping our entire business running and managing our family. Do you see where I’m going with this?”

“Yeah” she sighed heavily and held Ashlyn’s hands in her lap. “I guess I just feel far away from friends who aren’t in my daily life anymore.”

“And that’s normal, I think, when you start having kids and your other friends haven’t yet. You talk to Syd and Molly all the time, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, when Erica starts having kids I’m sure you two will get closer again.”

“But what if they don’t understand right now, that I don’t have as much time…”

“Princess listen” Ashlyn held her wife’s face with both hands and looked into her chocolate colored eyes. “Anybody who’s a real friend of yours, whether they have kids of their own or not, understands that your life is different now. And if they don’t understand that then, honestly, you don’t need them and you shouldn’t feel guilty about drifting apart.”
“Yeah, you’re right babe” Ali nuzzled into her strong hands and then turned her head to press a kiss into one of her palms. “Thanks for not making me feel like a lunatic. I’m sorry I got so worked up.”

“It’s ok. That’s what I’m here for” she grinned at her wife and her dimple appeared.

Ali leaned forward and kissed it before hugging her wife again.

“I love you Ashlyn. And I love our life and I love our son and I really do know what’s important” she paused and pulled back again. “I promise I do.”

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Christmas Eve at the big old house was fun and casual and festive. Kyle and Nathan were back, complete with engagement tattoos on their left ring fingers. They kept it simple. Kyle’s finger said ‘NATE 11-27-20’ and Nathan’s matched, but with Kyle’s name instead. The Scott Kriegers stayed up in NH but would be joining them Christmas afternoon at Ken’s house. Nathan’s parents and brother Jared all came too. It was the first time the two families had mingled for the holidays before. The Kimballs seemed to really love Kyle and accept him for who he was and that made Ali so happy. That might have been the first time that had ever happened for her brother. Ali and Ashlyn teased Jared about no shop talk during the holidays the first time he brought up some Knight-Harris business. He blushed a little and then laughed when he realized they were just teasing him. All three of them loved the company and loved their jobs and loved working together so any work conversations were usually enjoyable or just informative. But never negative.

The Dwyers, Sandi and Boss showed up with a screaming Cash. He had not woken up well from his nap and had been a terror in the car on the drive up.

“Don’t worry about it” Ali said sincerely as she hugged her best friend hello. “Drew’s getting his lower molars this month and he’s miserable and cranky too. It’ll be awesome!” she giggled.

“Maybe we put them both in a room together and close the door for a while...just see what happens” Sydney chuckled.

“Don’t tempt me” Ali replied over her shoulder as she hung their coats up in the coat closet.

Whitney and Ryan were there and so were Tammye and Carol of course. Ken, Vicki, Koty and Tanner arrived with Bandit in tow. They were all dog lovers and all of their dogs, even Bandit for the most part, were well behaved so it wasn’t a problem to bring them on nights like this. They just had to keep an eye on the food that was put out. Even well-behaved dogs had a hard time walking away from delicious food. The only tension in the house that night was coming from Koty. The young man had come a long way from 364 days ago. He had done well at his first semester back at college and was dating someone new who looked like she might become a serious girlfriend. He was living at home and still actively attending his AA meetings and working with a therapist to try and understand what had caused the need to forget about life for a while and hide in the numbing safety of booze.

When Ali heard that Tammye and Carol were coming for Christmas she wanted to make sure both Carol and Koty were ready for it. Koty had apologized to Carol before she left Massachusetts last Christmas and then he had written her a letter apologizing again. He had called her to make his formal amends as part of his 12-step program and she had been patient and kind to him. They both told Ali that seeing each other again wouldn’t be a problem. Ali walked Koty into the front parlor where Carol sat on the loveseat with Ashlyn. She had done some work with her therapist during the year as well, trying to make sure she didn’t have another PTSD episode again. The brunette had arranged to have Ashlyn, a strong woman Carol trusted, with her in the room and Kyle stood just
outside the entrance way in the front hall in case something went wrong. Nobody really thought it was necessary but Ali insisted, just in case. It was quiet in the room because it was gated off. No kids or dogs allowed unless expressly invited and supervised. Ali walked Koty into the room and then excused herself to go stand in the front hall with her brother.

“Hey Koty” Ashlyn started, standing up and giving him a big hug.

Bandit whined from the other side of the gate to the dining room, wagging his tail and happy to find his master.

“Hey Ash” he replied as he hugged her. “Merry Christmas.”

“Hi Koty” Carol said from her spot on the love seat, not ready to get closer just yet. “It’s good to see you. You look very handsome tonight” she complimented him sincerely.

“Thanks” he replied shyly, looking at the floor for a quick second. “I’m really glad you’re here Carol” he lifted his eyes to meet hers. “I know we spoke over the phone but I really wanted to tell you again how sorry I am for everything last year. I...”

“It’s ok Koty” she interrupted him with a genuine and warm smile. “You say what you need to say, if it helps you, but I don’t need you to apologize again. I know you’re sorry. I know you regret it. I’ve never worked the 12-step program but I know there’s a step in there somewhere about forgiveness.” She stood up and moved towards the nervous young man. “I forgive you” she said over his shoulder as she gave him a hug. “Now it’s time for you to learn how to forgive yourself I think” she finished as she pulled back and took her seat again.

And that was that. Things were a little awkward between them for the first hour or so but eventually everybody forgot to pay attention to the potential problem and that helped the two of them adjust even more. Carol knew he hadn’t hurt her on purpose. She knew the difference between his actions and those of her abusive dirtbag of an ex-husband. She was proud of herself for actually hugging him. That was something her therapist had warned might be difficult or even impossible to do. But she had done it. Ashlyn and Ali were both happy with the tete-a-tete that had taken place in the front parlor. It was a good sign and it helped set the tone for the rest of the night.

And the rest of the night was fun. They ate a lot and laughed a lot and watched Christmas specials together. In all the years before when she had spent Christmas with Ali’s family Ashlyn had never missed her family being there. She missed her family when they were apart at Christmas, but she knew she would see them soon and it didn’t distract her from enjoying her time with the Kriegers. That year, being with her Krieger family but having her mom and Carol there, as well as Whitney and Ryan, made it extra special. It felt so good that the keeper worried she might have just ruined a regular Krieger Christmas for her for the rest of her life. A regular Krieger Christmas might not ever measure up to this one. It was a chance she would just have to take.
Christmas Day was just as much fun but a lot more hectic because of all of the extra bodies at Ken’s house. The Scott Kriegers were there and still in the same really happy moods they had been in at Thanksgiving. Ashlyn, Kyle, Nathan and Ali kept cracking each other up throughout the day as they reminded each other about Kyle’s vivid reasoning for those good moods a month earlier. Sydney finally couldn’t stand it anymore so she pulled her bestie aside and demanded to know what was so fucking funny all the time. Ali explained what Kyle had said on their drive home from Thanksgiving and the coach howled with laughter, drawing attention from several family members in the vicinity. They lowered their voices and continued chatting as they grazed from the veggie platter on the kitchen island.

“Why’s Ash so mopey today?”

Ali felt love for her wife, love for her best friend and regret sweep past her volatile hormones and tried not to get too emotional. She loved that Sydney knew Ashlyn so well that she could tell she was a little sad that Christmas day. The brunette loved her wife and still felt terribly guilty about falling asleep the night before without playing with their new Christmas Eve toys.

“I think she’s wishing Whit and Ryan had come up. That’s probably most of it” Ali answered as she studied her wife from across the room.

“So what’s the rest of it then?” Sydney pressed, sensing there was more to the story.

“Oh, well, umm...” the brunette blushed and turned away from the island to walk towards the sliding door that opened out onto the snow-covered deck.

Sydney raised both eyebrows, realizing she had stumbled onto something juicy and sex-related, based on the deep blush. She followed Ali to the sliding door and stood close enough so they could keep their voices low.

“God Syd” Ali let a frustrated sigh escape her lips as she closed her eyes, unable to look at her best friend as she said the words. “I fell asleep before we could have sex last night...and she didn’t wake me up.” She paused and peeked at the bemused grin on the coach’s face. “And...I forgot about it this morning with all the Christmas morning stuff and Kyle and Nathan and Tammye and Carol...”

“Whooo, that sucks” Sydney giggled quietly, not wanting to make Ali feel bad but unable to keep herself from doing it. “Was she mad? Or was she hurt? Or both?”

“Well that’s the thing” Ali opened her eyes, her face still pink. “She hasn’t said anything yet. It’s been a busy morning.”

“Wait a minute” Sydney quirked an eyebrow at the brunette. “Are we talking about your special
Christmas present sex?” Her eyes went wide as she watched Ali bury her face in her hands and groan. “Holy shit Als.”

“I know! I feel just terrible about it. But I didn’t remember until we were already both up and then there were people around…”

“Well what happened? How bad was it? Maybe it’s not such a big deal?”

“It was late by the time we cleaned everything up. We were finishing the last of it and she told me to go upstairs and get ready to exchange our gifts” Ali smirked a little as she explained. “We didn’t put them under the tree this year because there were too many kids and people around…”

“Yeah, you’re not going to be doing that again for a loooong time” Sydney chuckled and patted the brunette’s growing belly.

“Yeah, you’re probably right” Ali rolled her eyes and sighed. “Anyway, long story short, I got my present out and put it on the bed and got into my pajamas. And then I got cold so I got under the covers…”

“No you didn’t!”

“I did” Ali groaned again.

“Well you didn’t stand a chance Alibaba” Sydney said emphatically. “It was a critical error, but don’t you guys wake each other up? I thought that was a thing now?”

“Yes, I tell her all the time to wake me up. She was good about it after Drew and we had talked about it and everything, but she didn’t last night” her voice was sad and quiet as she looked out the door to the backyard.

“So what happened this morning?”

“I woke up, oblivious because I’m always exhausted and oblivious these days” she chuckled. “And she was asleep in bed next to me and everything was normal and fine. Then Kyle brought Drew in and it was Christmas morning stuff. We kissed good morning and went downstairs to make breakfast and start the day.”

“And nothing about it since then?”

“No. And my gift wasn’t on the bed anymore either. She must have moved it when she came upstairs. I don’t even know where it is now.”

“Alright I think you’re making too big a deal out of this” the coach said quietly after thinking about it for a minute. “She’s always been so good about stuff like that. If you talk to her I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

“You think so?”

“I’m sure she’s freaked out because you haven’t talked to her about it yet. That’s exactly what’s bothering her today. I’d bet on it.” Sydney pulled the brunette into a hug and squeezed. “Go talk to her boo. Don’t let something silly ruin your Christmas.”

There wasn’t a good time to have the talk with her wife until just before the mid-afternoon holiday meal. Ali had been helping Vicki in the kitchen and when her keeper came in to put Drew’s sippy cup in the fridge she took advantage and pulled her out of the kitchen and into the garage.
“Hey!” a surprised Ashlyn yelped as she found herself on the other side of the door in the unheated garage.

“Hi” Ali said nervously as they faced each other. She still had hold of the blonde’s hand and chewed her bottom lip as she tried to say what she had been running over in her head for the past two hours. “I’m so sorry I fell asleep last night honey. I got cold and, I realize now, I should have just put my robe on instead of getting into bed and it didn’t mean anything and I wish you had woken me up because I was really looking forward to...”

“Al, honey...” the keeper tried to interrupt the increasingly rapid-fire rambling. Finally she put her hand on her wife’s arm and shook her a little bit to get her attention. “It’s ok sweetheart.”

Ali stopped rambling and tried to focus on the beautiful woman standing in front of her.

“It was so late and we really should have just planned it for another night” Ashlyn said softly. “Maybe when we’re not hosting Christmas Eve.”

The brunette felt her emotions swell again and she couldn’t decide whether to hug her or kiss her senseless. In the moment she teetered there trying to decide which action to pursue, the keeper spoke again.

“Are you mad at me baby?”

Ali brought their lips together in a slow, deep kiss that was tender and passionate at the same time. They held each other close as they kissed for a long few minutes, their body heat counteracting the cold air in the garage.

“So, not mad at me then?” Ashlyn quipped as they pulled back to catch their breath.

“No, not mad at you” the brunette giggled. “I thought you were mad at me. Are you mad at me?”

“Ali, you’re fourteen weeks pregnant, working full time and entertaining four houseguests for Christmas” she cocked her head to the side as she spoke to her beautiful brunette. “You pretty much have a free pass” she chuckled.

“So you were mad at me though...” Ali tried to understand as she picked a couple stray dog hairs off of her wife’s sweater sleeve.

“No I wasn’t. Not at all” Ashlyn patiently explained. “I was disappointed, I won’t lie, but that was it. If it was really a huge deal I would have woken you up. But I was tired too.”

“Oh thank God” Ali exhaled and hugged her girl again, both of them chuckling. “I love you so much Ashlyn.”

“I love you too honey.”

“Dinner’s almost ready” they heard Sydney’s voice from the other side of the door after a quick knock.

“Be right there!” Ali yelled.

“So, about that present...” Ashlyn smirked at her wife.

“You didn’t open it without me did you?” Ali looked alarmed and disappointed.

“Nah, but I did do some investigative shaking...”
“Oh, you brat” Ali giggled and smacked her keeper’s butt as they turned to go back into the house. “Just wait babe, please?”

“Ok princess, as you wish.”

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As they sat on the plane making their way to the Melbourne airport two days later, Ashlyn held her wife’s hand and looked out the window, past her sleeping beauty in the window seat. As excited as she was to visit the rest of her family, and Ali’s, in Florida she was sad that Christmas was over. She chastised herself for being greedy as she thought about how lucky she was that her mom and Carol had come up two years in a row to spend Christmas with them. The week had been a lot of fun and very similar to the previous year, but a lot less hectic because there were far fewer people to wrangle. Tammye and Carol had been wonderful too. They spent a lot of time with Drew but made time to go do fun things on their own too. Ali took them shopping in the city one day so they could do some more sightseeing. They all went ice-skating on the Common again and everybody was amazed at how much better Ashlyn had gotten, including Ali.

“Someone’s been keeping secrets from their wife” Ali playfully accused as Ashlyn skated confidently up to her and made a hard stop a few feet in front of the brunette.

“Maybe” the keeper beamed and even blushed a little.

“Well I’m very impressed” Ali grinned proudly at her as she got ready to lift Drew onto the ice for his very first time. “How long have Hilary and the girls been working with you?” she quirked an eyebrow.

“What? How did you know?” the blonde’s face registered shock as her wife grinned at her and winked. “I spent a lot of time between Breakers trainings skating with them, whenever anybody was there. Hilary set it up, but they all helped me.”

“I didn’t know a thing about it until you just made that nice hockey stop right there” the brunette chuckled. “Seriously, babe, nice job. I’m very impressed, and more than a little turned on” she leaned forward and whispered the last part of her sentence into the keeper’s ear before kissing her cheek.

They had skated very slowly and defensively with Ashlyn running interference and watching anybody that came anywhere near them like a hawk. She had tried to convince Ali not to even get out on the ice because she was pregnant. But being three months pregnant was a lot different than being eight and even five months pregnant like Beth and Molly had been, respectively, the year before. But that protective streak that ran so strongly through Ashlyn was one of the brunette’s favorite things about her. It always had been. They both had a very strong desire and willingness to protect the people they loved, no matter what. Ali hoped, for their own sake, that nobody got too close to them on the ice.

The four women went to the Nutcracker with Kyle and Nathan while Ken and Vicki babysat Drew. Kyle called it their ‘gay night out’ and laughed so much that even Tammye and Carol joined in, despite their shyness on the subject. Carol loved the fancy restaurant they went to before the show and turned out to be a real foodie, not only a very good cook. She loved everything about food from the way it was grown to the way it was prepared and what it was paired with on the plate. She wasn’t snobby about it at all either. Her love for cuisine was pure and easy to see. Ashlyn and her mother joked, appreciatively, about how lucky they were to have women in their lives who loved to cook and did it well. Despite Drew’s teething and often terrible mood, it had been a really fun and wonderful week and the keeper was sad to see it end. Her spirits lifted quickly though as she
thought forward to next year when they would be celebrating with a new baby again. Sometimes, at random moments like that, Ashlyn felt like her heart would explode out of her chest because she was so happy. She looked over at her son who was playing on their iPad with his headphones on as he sat in the seat between GiGi and Caro. The two older women were both watching him adoringly and glancing at each other from time to time. The keeper could not stop smiling as she thanked God again for everything she had been given.

They stayed at Carol’s beach house again and fell right into a beach vacation mentality. Ali was just starting her fourth month of pregnancy and her morning sickness was almost gone so she was ecstatic to have most of her mornings back again. Her rabid sex drive kicked in again too, just like last time. They eased into it that week because she was just transitioning from the morning sickness to the ‘I want sex every other day’ part of the pregnancy. Ali was looking forward to spending two weeks in the sun with the love of her life and their little family. Drew was adorable on the beach. He was nineteen months old and a pretty great little kid. He was cautious and both his mothers were secretly thrilled about that. He didn’t run head-long into everything like Cash did. Cash was older so he naturally was more confident so it was a tough comparison to make. But, in general, Drew was a little less reckless than other kids his age. It didn’t seem like he was afraid though. It was more like he was thinking about what would happen if he jumped off of the bed even though his moms had told him not to. And not just the repercussions of punishment, but it was as if he was studying the situation with a critical eye and trying to figure out how much it would hurt his legs to make the landing. He was just a toddler still and they didn’t think he was a genius or anything. Ali, in particular, appreciated the way he seemed to think before he leapt. In that regard he definitely took after his brunette mama instead of his blonde mama.

Their life for the next four days consisted of waking up, spending the morning playing and exploring on the beach with anybody else who was around – sometimes Beth or Chris would bring or drop off Johnny and Lizzy for the day, eating lunch, having sex in their room in the basement while Drew took his afternoon nap, visiting Chris and Beth and staying for dinner, then coming home for Drew’s bedtime. After he was asleep Ali and Ashlyn would go for a walk on the beach or sometimes out to a movie or something if Carol or Tammye were home to watch Drew. Of course, there were tweaks to the schedule. Sometimes they napped after lunch instead of having sex. Sometimes they had a date night with dinner and dancing or a concert or a movie afterwards. Sometimes they went to bed early and had sex then, instead of in the afternoon. The point is, they were flexible and relaxed and happy. Ashlyn got some surfing in, almost every morning, and Ali was sad not to be able to join her. She was very happy to be pregnant and grateful that everything had been going well so far, but sometimes she selfishly looked forward to coming to Florida with her wife for vacation and not being restricted by anything.

“You’re awful quiet sis” Chris sat down next to his sister in the dimly lit lit screen porch at his house. Everyone else was either cleaning up the kitchen or bathing a child and the two Harris siblings were supposed to be setting up the screen porch for cards. “Everything ok?”

Ashlyn took a deep breath, a little embarrassed to be caught so deep in thought.

“Yeah, all good bro” she smiled at him sincerely. “Just relaxing and enjoying being here.”

“I’ve got a lot of memories of her on this screen porch and sometimes,” he chuckled and blushed a little, “it freaks me out to sit out here.”

“Oh I love it” she replied, tilting her head back just a bit and closing her eyes. “Sometimes if I close my eyes I can still smell her perfume.”

“Tea-rose” he said softly. “Jesus Bash, you’re going to make me cry.”
Chris had given Gram Tea-rose perfume for every birthday she ever had since he had turned twelve. Everybody teased him about it but Gram defended him every time.

“It’s my favorite and he knows that” she would say, just a little bit indignantly. “And I haven’t had to buy my own perfume since he was in middle school and that’s pretty great if you ask me.”

“Sorry Bubba” she reached over and put her hand on his big shoulder and left it there for a minute. “I don’t know how it happened” she continued, quietly, after another minute. “But I smile more now when I think of her, instead of just feeling sad or pissed off. Not all the time. Sometimes I still feel nothing but angry when I think about her not being with us anymore. But times like now, I just love feeling close to her and remembering how fucking awesome she was.”

“That sounds great” he nodded his head and pushed the tears away from his eyes with his thick thumbs. “I’ll just keep waiting until I can do that too.” He sighed and then stood up to get the room ready. “Now get your lazy ass up and help me so we can beat these hacks at cards and make her proud.”

They drove to Miami in the afternoon on Wednesday, December 30th and spent the next six days at Deb’s house. They would drive back to Satellite Beach for another four days after their time in Miami and then fly back home. The last time they had spent New Year’s Eve with Deb and Mike at the club had been two years ago. Ali had been four months pregnant with Drew and they were coming off of their most challenging year ever, with Gram’s passing and Ali getting her MBA. They hadn’t thought about it when they were making plans this year, but now that it was happening they were both secretly happy to repeat anything they had done during that pregnancy. It was silly, they knew, but they both found themselves being a little superstitious about it. The similarities to their last NYE in Miami stopped pretty immediately though. The first major difference was that Kyle and Nathan had flown down to Miami for the long weekend and to spend New Year’s Eve with the family this year. They were heading to Key West for the rest of their ten-day vacation on Sunday. Kyle and Deb had kept his visit a secret from Ali and Ashlyn and both women squealed in excitement when he and Nathan walked in the door around lunchtime on New Year’s Eve day.

“What's up, bitches?!” Kyle yelled excitedly as he picked them both up in hugs.

Drew clapped his hands and giggled from his high chair next to the kitchen table where they had all been eating lunch.

“Bitches” he said with a grin and clapped his hands again as everyone else in the room blanched.

Ali glared at her brother and, for a minute, he feared for his own safety. Kyle laughed, shrugged his shoulders and made an apologetic ‘eek’ face that Drew couldn’t see.

“Yikes. Sorry guys. I keep forgetting he’s talking more now...”

“Yes” Ali said sternly, still glaring. “He’s big into mimicking everything you say or do these days so tread carefully or I will end you.” She spoke the end of her sentence through gritted teeth.

“Got it” Kyle replied meekly, his eyes wide, as he moved to the chair next to his nephew and loudly kissed his fat cheek. “Hi big boy. How you doing? You eating some lunch? Mmmmm, that looks yummy...”
The weather, for once, did not cooperate. The afternoon thunderstorms that often rolled through the area in the summer were usually brief and welcome as they brought relief to the humidity of the hot afternoon. But that day they didn’t stop. It poured rain and there was thunder and lightning almost the whole time, beginning at about 3pm. Deb and Mike were going to stay home with Drew that night anyway and send Ali and Ashlyn to the club without them, which the younger women were a little uncomfortable with to begin with. They weren’t members of the club, and they both felt guilty making Deb and Mike stay home on a night they always went out and celebrated together. But Deb had insisted that there wasn’t a babysitter that she trusted enough with her grandson and it wasn’t worth the risk. As they put Drew down for his nap after lunch they ducked into the guest room to discuss their plans for the evening.

“I don’t want to stay home on New Year’s Eve babe” Ali said emphatically. “It’s your favorite holiday and we’re going out.”

“My favorite part of it is the fireworks and those have already been cancelled for tonight so I really don’t mind staying home” Ashlyn offered as she flopped backwards on the bed, enjoying the bounce with a cute grin.

“Well we don’t have to go to the club” the brunette countered as her mind tried to work out a solution. “We can go anywhere we want. There are clubs and bars...”

“I didn’t bring any clothes to get all dressed up baby, and neither did you and I think that’s just how this vacation is supposed to be.”

“But Ash, it’s your favorite” Ali’s voice was sad and defeated as she frowned at her wife from where she stood at the foot of the bed.

“I’m telling you I’m ok staying in tonight Al. I promise it’s ok” she sat up and straightened her long legs out and then squeezed Ali’s legs together between her feet. “Honestly, it’s been really bothering me that your mom was staying home to watch Drew anyway” she admitted.

“Yeah, me too actually. She told me she would get a babysitter when we planned this out or I wouldn’t have agreed to it.” The brunette reached down and put her hands underneath Ashlyn’s calves as they studied each other. “Are you sure honey?”

“Yes!” the keeper exclaimed louder than she should have.

“Shhhhhh” Ali giggled and smacked her leg. “You’ll wake him up” she chastised and then smiled at her easy-going wife. “Ok” she agreed after another minute. “We can stay in but we’re going out to eat, at least.”

“Deal.”

And that’s what they did. The whole family, including Mike Christopher, went out to their favorite Chinese restaurant and stuffed themselves. The storm got worse as the evening wore on and some of the roads were starting to flood as they made their way back to the house. They made a quick stop at the grocery store, which was a madhouse full of people panicking about the storm, for the only thing they deemed essential that night – ice cream and fixings for hot fudge and caramel sundaes. Ashlyn even got a pint of Haagen Dazs butter pecan for her wife who craved the same weird foods this pregnancy as she had during her first. After they put Drew to bed and Mike had fallen asleep in the recliner, the two couples and Deb played ‘Cards Against Humanity’ and died laughing. Deb was horrified at first but she adapted quickly, and nobody laughed louder than she did at most of the funny outcomes. And nobody groaned as loud as Ali did at the disgusting ones, especially in front of her own mother.
“This game is so much better if you’ve had a drink or two” she said halfway through their first game. “Just trust me on this” she looked at her brother and winked.

After two games they switched to ‘Celebrity’ and lost Ali to a nap on the couch and Mike to his bed. Ashlyn tried to get the brunette to go up to bed herself but she refused.

“I’m just going to take a little nap and then play the next game” she answered as she curled up in the corner of the couch, right in the middle of everything. “But, just in case, you have to promise to wake me up for our kiss.”

“I will baby, I promise.”

She slept for over an hour until the room got suddenly quiet. Ali had gotten used to the loud, boisterous group all around her and the quiet woke her up. It took her a few minutes to figure out what had happened and where she was and why she was awake. Sometimes the stillness can be deafening.

“Look who’s awake?” Deb smiled at her daughter as she came and sat down next to her on the couch with a huge ice cream sundae, complete with whipped cream and a maraschino cherry on top.

“Yummm” Ali licked her lips and started to get up but her mother stopped her.

“Yours is already in the works baby girl, just sit and relax” Deb patted her legs which were curled up next to her. “Did you have a good nap?”


“Your wife and your brother” Deb rolled her eyes. “But Nathan and I are just getting warmed up.”

“Yeah, no, we’re changing teams because we’re just too good” Kyle announced as he came and sat down in the recliner with his own sundae.

“That’s not why, you jackass” Ashlyn laughed as she carried in two bowls and two bottles of water under her arms. “Deb and I are going to kick your asses because girls rule. And no putting in names that only you two know” she shot a menacing look at Kyle and Nathan as he walked into the room. “Make it a good game.”

Ali moved so she was sitting upright but still in the elbow of the ‘L’ shaped couch. She took the big ice cream sundae her wife handed to her with a grateful smile and a tiny squeal of excitement.

“I didn’t want to wake you so I guessed you’d want a sundae and not just your butter pecan...”

“You guessed right you brilliant woman” she leaned over and kissed her wife’s lips as she sat down next to her on the couch.

“Vanilla ice cream, hot fudge, hot caramel, no whipped cream, no nuts, with a cherry for my love” Ashlyn recited Ali’s favorite sundae order from the first time the two had eaten ice cream together with some other members of the Breakers during Ashlyn’s first summer in Boston. They had enjoyed sundaes since then so the keeper wasn’t pulling the order from all the way back in 2015. But they didn’t eat them very often so it was pretty impressive that she had gotten it perfect. “Enjoy” she grinned at her girl.

“This is sooo good. You even did more caramel than fudge, just the way I like it” the brunette noted as she worked her spoon through the delicious dessert. “Thank you so much honey.”
The keeper looked shyly at her wife and leaned over for another quick kiss as Kyle teased them for being too fucking cute. They all ate their ice cream sundaes and turned up the volume on one of the network’s NYE specials so they could check out what the rest of the world was doing while they were riding out the monsoon in Miami. It was just after 10pm and the sugar high helped them stay awake for another hour and then they all started to get sleepy, even Ashlyn. In a last-ditch effort to fight it, the blonde started texting her family and friends to check in with them. She was thrilled when Meg facetimed her a few minutes later. The little girl was very excited that she was going to stay awake until midnight for the very first time ever. Ashlyn encouraged her but told her it was ok if she didn’t make it too. Midnight was a very grown up and late time. She panned her phone around the room and showed little Meg that everybody she was with was super tired too, and they were all grown-ups.

Ali had fallen asleep with her ice cream bowl still in her lap and Ashlyn couldn’t resist taking a quick video. She focused on her sleeping beauty and then moved the camera up and then down so she could look into the empty bowl. If you listened carefully you could hear Ali’s soft snoring and Ashlyn’s hushed giggling. She sent it to Sydney and Ken and her mom and Whitney, enjoying the reactions and flurry of texts she got in response.

As midnight finally approached Ashlyn got her GoPro camera out and used the extension attachment so she could get a wide shot of the four sleepers with herself grinning in the middle of the shot. She went on to social media and posted the pic on all of her accounts with this comment:

‘Celebrating NYE with my homies, at home. Lol. Where are you ringing in the New Year? #HappyNewYear #Miamimonsoon #theyrecutewhentheyresleeping #sorrynotsorry #lucky #grateful #happy #cheers!’

Ashlyn smiled as replies started to come in. She read a bunch and responded to a few fans and more than a few friends. She got so distracted on her phone that she almost missed waking everybody up. At 11:57pm with only three minutes to spare she turned the volume up on the tv and gently shook her wife, after taking the bowl off of her lap. She woke Deb up next who then woke up Kyle and Nathan. Ali did not look happy to be awake. At all. But the keeper knew she had done the right thing. Her wife would have been very upset to miss their NYE kiss. They goggily watched the countdown begin in Times Square and were all stunned when Mike Christopher came stumbling down the stairs in his pajamas and over to the couch, literally in the nick of time. He landed next to Deb, whose face lit up at the sight of him and made them all get a little misty, and hugged her quickly. Just as the ball dropped a second later they all yelled ‘Happy New Year!’ and kissed the person they loved while ‘Auld Lang Syne’ played from the tv.

Ali was just awake enough to push down her anger and crankiness at being woken up and enjoy the moment. Ashlyn gave her a sweet kiss, told her she loved her and then kissed her again. The brunette pulled her girl closer, grabbing a fistful of her shirt in one hand and her elbow with the other, and deepened the second kiss. She licked Ashlyn’s lips and slipped her tongue inside once the keeper parted them. Ashlyn was always a little taken aback when Ali did something like that in front of their family or friends, but especially family. The brunette was usually so shy and private about those things and this very forward display was completely out of character. Except on NYE or if there were fireworks involved. She had done it from the first NYE they were a couple and she swore to herself she would never not do it. Ali had put up with so many years of not being kissed on NYE and then a whole bunch of years where she got pecked on the cheek, or maybe the lips if Emily had been drinking enough, and she just wasn’t willing to tolerate it anymore. She had found the love of her life and, through some miracle, she loved her back just as much. That didn’t happen every day and she swore she wouldn’t waste it or take it for granted. These public kisses, few and far between though they may be, were the brunette’s way of shouting her love from the rooftops. Maybe it was only once or twice a year, but still, that meant she declared her love for Ashlyn for all
the world to see at least once or twice a year and it felt awesome.

When she finally pulled back to breathe she smiled at her gorgeous wife and caressed her face, tenderly moving her fingers across her beautiful cheekbones and slightly puffy lips. This woman meant everything to her and that was no exaggeration. When she started to think about what her life would be like now without Ashlyn in it, she came up empty. It just was a blank in her brain like the neurons revolted in there and refused to cooperate with the request. Ali couldn’t imagine life without her love in every part of it, filling in the cracks and evening out the rough surfaces. This woman and their life together were so precious that the brunette still couldn’t believe how lucky she was. There were moments when she couldn’t believe that she had hidden in her solitary house and her solitary work for four years. She would never be able to do something like that again, not even for four days forget about four years! Something had changed inside her. Her chemistry and biology were different now. They had been transformed by the love of a woman with a big heart and an easy smile who smelled like the beach and had the light of a hundred suns inside her. Ali was living as she had never lived before, with her eyes wide open and her heart on her sleeve, trusting her wife to keep it safe from everything and for always.

“Happy New Year baby” Ashlyn whispered as they kept their heads together, breathing the same air and staying in their own little world for a few minutes longer.

This hadn’t been their most exciting or most romantic New Year’s Eve. They didn’t see any fireworks and they didn’t get all dressed up. They didn’t even drink or have a champagne toast. But, as was their way, they made the most of what life had presented them and had a wonderful evening anyway.

“Happy New Year” Ali replied breathlessly, her emotions rising up and taking over. She had never been more excited for a New Year in her life. “I can’t wait to spend 2021 with you. I love you so much Ashlyn.”

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