The Sea Captain's House - Part 5

by Beautyinthemoonlight

Summary

Ali Krieger is the managing partner of Knight-Harris Co. and Ashlyn Harris is fighting for minutes in goal for the Boston Breakers. 2021 will turn out to be one of the most challenging of their entire lives for both women. Will it be Ashlyn's last in Breakers blue? Can Ali continue to rely on the people she's hired to keep their company running while she's taking care of baby Krieger #2? The rest of their world keeps turning with big, life changes for their closest friends and family. Can the loving couple survive what fate has in store for them this year? Or will their seemingly unbreakable bond get stretched too thin for even them to hold together? Somehow, the love, friendship and safety they've always nurtured and enjoyed in the big old house saves them and their little family before too much damage is done.

Notes

Part 5 starts with a 6-month jump forward to June 2021...

Warning: Emergency Room visit and traumatic event for a character.

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.
A Terrible Position

“Ashlyn. Ashlyn!” Dr. Comello’s face was stony and serious and the keeper looked at it, waiting for it to smile as it usually did. Instead, the doctor put her hands on Ashlyn’s biceps and shook her, hard. “Ashlyn I need you to pay attention now!”

They were in the Emergency Room at the hospital near Ali’s old house and the keeper vaguely remembered driving there through the dark, empty streets. Fast. Much too fast. They had left the big old house at 2:30am but Ashlyn had no idea what time it was now. As she set her mind to work, trying to figure out the answer to that mystery, she felt strong hands shake her again.

“Ashlyn!”

Suddenly everything was clear again for a minute. The muffled, distorted sounds she had been hearing and the fuzzy, obscure gauze that had clouded her eyes were all clarified and lifted. All of a sudden she was back in her body and she could feel her heart pounding and her chest heaving and her nostrils flaring as she tried to breathe and focus on Dr. Comello’s worried face in front of her.

“There she is” Patty said and patted the keeper’s arms, squeezing them again to make sure. “Alright Ash, we don’t have a lot of time now. I need to know what you want me to do if something goes wrong in there. Can you tell me?”

“In where?” Ashlyn heard the panic and confusion in her own voice and it frightened her. What the fuck was Dr. Comello talking about?

“In the operating room” came the doctor’s short, succinct reply. She squeezed Ashlyn’s arms again, not wanting to lose her now that she finally had her attention. “Ali’s being prepped now and I’m on my way up to do the emergency C-section.” She paused and watched the keeper try to process the information that she had already given her once before. “Ashlyn – if something goes wrong and I can’t save them both, what do you want me to do?”

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An hour later Ashlyn sat in the surgical waiting room between Sydney and Whitney, each holding one of her hands tightly. It was almost 4:30am on Saturday June 19th and the keeper’s head was killing her. Her whole body was a wreck and she had already thrown up once, down in a trashcan in the ER waiting room.

“How...how are you here?” the keeper had asked in a daze when she had seen Sydney rushing towards her in the surgical waiting room about forty-five minutes earlier.

“Patty had one of the nurses call me” she had replied as she wrapped Ashlyn in a tight hug. “Whit’s on her way too. Where are Deb and Drew?”

They sat down and Sydney took her sweatshirt off and pulled it over Ashlyn’s head. She was shivering in her sleep shorts and t-shirt, both covered in Ali’s blood.

“At home. I didn’t know what to do...”

Sydney typed into her phone quickly and then took Ashlyn’s hand and squeezed it, rubbing her arm.

“Where is she now?” the coach had tried to keep the fear out of her voice and felt like she had done a pretty good job. It was obvious that Ashlyn was in a little bit of shock and she didn’t want to make it
“Are they doing a C-section?”

“Yes. Emergency C-section, that’s what Patty said. She’s in surgery and I’m supposed to wait here until she comes to talk to me” the keeper had replied almost robotically.

“Ok. So that’s what we’ll do” Sydney had patted her leg with her other hand and tried to sound calm and confident.

Her phone dinged and she held it in one hand and read and typed with her thumb.

“Ken and Deb are on their way. Vicki’s going to stay with Drew so he’s fine. Don’t worry about him, ok?”

Whitney had raced into the small waiting room and hugged Ashlyn for a long time. Her face was red and puffy but relieved to see her best friend, even under such terrifying circumstances. She handed Sydney the zip up training jacket she had brought for the keeper and the coach put it on gratefully, not wanting to make Ashlyn change.

“Ryan’s getting some juice and coffee and bagels and stuff” the law student had said quickly as she sat next to Ashlyn and clutched her hand. Sydney had texted her to bring something Ash would eat and drink because she was a wreck and Whitney could not agree more now that she had seen the keeper. “He’ll be back soon.”

The three sat there quietly, at 4:30am, just breathing and squeezing hands. The surgical waiting room was about 12 feet by 20 feet with four rows of padded blue chairs that were joined together. The rows faced each other, alternating so there were two sections to the room, with the two rows in the middle of the room back to back. There was a coffee table between each pair of facing rows with old magazines and fairly recent sections of newspapers. There were clean white walls and a medium grey carpet and easy listening music being piped in through two speakers in the ceiling. The three women were the only people in the room, unless you counted Sydney’s unborn baby. She was 4 months pregnant and just starting to show the beginnings of her baby bump that June morning.

Whitney watched Ashlyn’s face but it did nothing but stare straight ahead at the double doors that led down the corridor to the surgery wing. Sydney was still in her phone, giving the only update she had and telling loved ones where to find them once they arrived.

“What happened Ash?” Whitney asked, unable to contain her curiosity any longer. “Can you tell us what happened?”

It took a couple of minutes but finally the keeper took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then she took another one and told them everything she could remember, her voice still sounding far away and unfamiliar.

Saturday the 19th was game day and the Breakers had a home game scheduled at 4pm so Ashlyn had most of the morning off before she was scheduled to head to the stadium. That meant that Friday night, last night, she and Ali could spend some alone time after Drew went to bed and Ashlyn could still sleep-in Saturday morning to make up for any late bedtimes. And that’s what they had done.

Ashlyn put Drew to bed and spent some time with the dogs and Deb and then went up to bed at about 9:30pm. She and Ali talked for a while as the blonde rubbed every inch of her almost nine-months pregnant wife to help soothe her aching back and sore muscles. And then Ali’s pregnancy-induced overactive sex-drive kicked in and they spent a couple of hours having sex. Pretty careful, 8-1/2 month pregnant sex.

“She’s going to kill me when she finds out everybody knows we had sex last night” Ashlyn groaned. “Don’t say anything ok? Just pretend I left that part out.” She looked from one woman to the other
and they both nodded back at her.

“Don’t worry” Sydney said softly. “It’ll just stay between us, and the doctor. You told Patty right?”

“Well yeah, I figured it might have something to do with it. I don’t know” she rubbed her face in frustration and continued with her story.

After Ashlyn helped her wife to the bathroom they got back into bed and went to sleep. Nothing out of the ordinary happened. Ali hadn’t complained about anything unusual bothering her or causing her discomfort or anything like that. Then the brunette had some really bad cramps that woke her up at 2am and they were so bad that she woke Ashlyn up too.

“When I moved the covers off of her so I could help her roll over I saw the blood” Ashlyn recounted and swallowed hard.

“How much blood?” Sydney bravely asked even though she was afraid of the answer. “Just like some spotting like at the beginning of the pregnancy?”

“No way. It was a lot of blood and she was in a lot of pain” Ashlyn disentangled her hands from both women and leaned forward with her forearms on her knees and started rocking a little bit as she remembered the gory scene. “She was scared even before she knew about the blood. I could see it in her eyes.”

She told them how she ran down the hall and told Deb she was taking Ali to the hospital and to watch Drew and then helped her wife down the backstairs and out to her car.

“She wanted me to take her truck but I didn’t think I could get her up into the seat without her help and she was really weak by then” Ashlyn smiled a little. “She was worried about getting blood inside my car” she shook her head, smile starting to fall as she did, “as if that mattered at all.”

They all chuckled, knowing that was vintage Ali behavior. Ashlyn’s tears started to fall again as she continued.

“She passed out as soon as we got onto the highway and I just floored it. God, it was so scary. A cop pulled me over just as we got off the highway and I explained to her what was happening” she paused to take a deep breath. “My face must have looked pretty scary because she put her lights on and led me right to the ER at top speed. Thank God.”

“Probably the passed out pregnant lady next to you got her attention too” Whitney suggested with wide eyes. “Jesus Ash, that’s absolutely terrifying.”

“The cop must have radioed ahead because there was a gurney waiting for us and she and I lifted Ali onto it and that was it. She was gone. I didn’t get to see her again or tell her I love her or anything...” the keeper couldn’t go on. The tears choked her words in her throat and she buried her head in Whitney’s chest and sobbed as the law student held her.

“She’s right where she needs to be Ash. You did great. It’ll be ok, you’ll see” she said softly as she rubbed her back and arm.

Just then the double doors opened and a young female doctor walked over to them as all three women stood up.

“Dr. Comello delivered the baby via emergency C-section and she’s being transported to the NICU where they can take better care of her. Your wife is still on the operating table. Dr. Comello is trying to get some bleeding under control and she may have to do a partial hysterectomy but she doesn’t
“Is she going to be ok?”

“Is the baby ok? Why is she in the NICU?”

“How bad is the bleeding?”

“What caused the bleeding?”

“Is my wife ok?!” Ashlyn’s voice rose above the two others as panic started to set in. She had been worried about losing the baby, not Ali. And now, from what the doctor just said, she could still lose them both! “What about my daughter?!”

“We’re doing everything we can Mrs. Krieger. You can go down to the NICU for more information on your daughter. She’s almost 2 weeks early and needs some help with her lungs right now.” She paused as if considering saying something more. “And as soon as there’s news about your wife I’ll come back out and let you know. But I’ve really got to get back in there now.”

Ashlyn stood there, stunned. What the fuck was she supposed to do now? She needed to know what was happening with both Ali and the baby.

“Ash” Whitney turned her friend around and held her face in her hands. “Hey. You need to stay strong now. Just for a while longer ok?” she looked over Ashlyn’s shoulder at Sydney’s worried face. They nodded at each other and then the law student spoke again. “What do you want to do?”

“I need to check on the baby” she answered slowly but decisively. “Then I’ll come back up and check on Ali.”

“I’ll stay here” Sydney offered quickly. “You two go to the NICU and I’ll wait here. Text me...” she started to say but Whitney cut her off.

“I will, right away. You too.”

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Ali’s second pregnancy, up until that point, had gone pretty well. It was very similar to her first pregnancy in most ways. The biggest difference had been that she felt twice as tired this time. She assumed it was because she was two years older and also chasing a two-year old around as well. Ali’s morning sickness had stopped during their Florida vacation during the last week of December and first week of January and then her increased sex drive had kicked in, just like with her first pregnancy. She had the same peculiar cravings and most of the same symptoms. Both she and Ashlyn felt much more comfortable and confident the second time around because they had already done it before. They both had moments where Sydney’s miscarriage spooked them, but those faded with each week that passed. It was reassuring how similar Ali’s two pregnancies were. The brunette even checked in with her mom and Deb assured her that her two pregnancies had been almost identical too. It didn’t happen all the time, but it was pretty common for a woman’s pregnant body to behave the same way multiple times.

The first ultrasound produced a hazy picture of the baby during their 16-week appointment towards the end of January. It wasn’t detailed enough to tell them the sex yet but everything else looked good. When they went back for their 20-week appointment at the end of February they got much better pictures.

“This one is not being very cooperative” Dr. Comello chuckled as she tried to get a half-decent angle
with the ultrasound wand so she could see if it was a boy or a girl. “Honestly, it’s like he or she doesn’t want us to know or something.”

Ashlyn squeezed her wife’s hand as they both peered at the screen trying to see...anything that looked like anything other than a general, baby-shaped blob. After another few agonizing minutes and a couple of frustrated sighs from the doctor, they finally got a crystal clear picture of their baby girl.

“There she is” Patty exclaimed, relieved. “Finally a great angle and a good picture. Can you see?”

“There’s our baby girl” Ali whispered as she held onto Ashlyn’s arm with both hands.

“Hi little one” Ashlyn breathed out as her face broke into a huge, dimple-bearing grin.

The brunette had gained about twelve pounds so far and had been showing since the end of January. As the baby grew, Ali was revisited by the heartburn, constipation, fatigue and back pain that she had experienced with Drew. She didn’t feel the baby kick until the very end of March, which was a little later than she and Ashlyn had both felt Drew’s first couple of kicks. Their baby girl first made her presence known while Ali was sitting at her desk in her Cambridge office. It was one big, powerful boot and it hurt way more than Drew’s first little kicks had. The brunette thought something might have been wrong and that it had been some sort of cramp or contraction until she felt another equally strong boot a few hours later as she drove home.

“Everything looks normal” Dr. Comello confirmed at their 28-week appointment at the end of April. “Make sure you’re getting enough rest now. I know it’s hard with her big brother running around, but try to get some more sleep if you can. And you’re a tiny bit underweight. Nothing to worry about, but I’d like to see you over 20 pounds when you come back in two weeks.”

“Did you hear that honey?” Ashlyn smiled with a mischievous glint in her eye. “You need to sleep more and eat more! It’s a dream come true and I’m jealous as hell” she teased as her wife giggled and playfully rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, it’ll be a piece of cake now that your season has started” Ali chuckled as her keeper leaned over and kissed her cheek.

The brunette had been so exhausted that she skipped her volunteer shift at the Boston Marathon that month. She had gotten a cold and didn’t want to risk it by spending the day standing in the cold and rainy weather that the runners raced in that day. Ali found it almost impossible to stay awake for the birthing classes they took in May. They went for five weeks, from 7-9pm every Monday night and the only way the brunette could keep her eyes open was if she had a nap before they left for class. That meant for those five Mondays she missed family dinnertime with Drew and Ashlyn, which she hated to do. She was just so tired. Part of the problem in May was that they were transitioning Drew into his very first big boy bed and he kept getting out of it and coming in to their room in the middle of the night.

“Hey buddy” Ashlyn croaked from her side of the bed when Ali poked her to wake her up and take him back to his room. “Let’s go back to bed” she said as she scooped him up and carried him down the hall to Whitney’s old room.

They had repainted the room in different hues of blue like the ocean and had given it a beach theme. Drew’s big boy bed was shaped like a shark and came with shark themed sheets, blanket and comforter too. They bought a new comforter to go on the other twin bed that they were keeping in that room so it would match the color scheme of the room. Drew had made most of the choices himself which they had encouraged him to do. Making his own big boy decisions was supposed to
make it easier for the toddler to embrace his new bed and new room. He eventually got it by his second birthday at the end of May, but it was a rough couple of weeks and none of them got a good night’s sleep during that time.

“There’s my good little shark” the keeper said as she tucked him in and gave him another kiss and a smile. “Sleep well sweet boy, I love you.”

“Love you mama.”

Ali started working from her home office more as June started and she went to see Dr. Comello every week now that she was in her ninth month. Deb had come up to the big old house to help with Drew as soon as her school year had ended. By the second week of June she was there to assist as the brunette put the finishing touches on the slightly re-decorated nursery and Ashlyn’s busy NWSL scheduled ramped up. The FIFA calendar this year was set up to allow for the EUROs to be played for three weeks at the end of July and early August. That meant the NWSL schedule was chalk full of games before and after those dates. The Breakers had 6 games in the month of May, 5 in June and 3 in the first two weeks of July.

Ali had just gone to her 37th-week appointment earlier that week, before the bloody scare late that Friday night.

“Your bloodwork shows you’re right on the edge of being anemic” Patty explained with a frown. “I’m going to increase your Folic Acid just to be safe. I’m not too worried about it because I know you take care of yourself” she studied her patient and pursed her lips. “It’s too bad Ashlyn’s not here to be my spy” she said, half-jokingly.

“Ugh, I know” Ali agreed. “Her schedule is brutal this month. They’ve got a game tomorrow night in Chicago and they flew out this morning.”

“Let’s just get your iron up ok? And your mom is here now to help out with Drew, right?”

“Yeah” the brunette sighed with a small smile. “I don’t know what we’d do without her.”

“Well let her do some more. I don’t want you so exhausted that we can’t have the delivery you want. You need to start cutting back at work too. I don’t want to take any chances. If you get your iron up by next appointment we can talk some more, but until then, take it easy. Rest up. Got it?”

“Got it.”

But she hadn’t made it to her next appointment.

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The whole time Ashlyn stood in the NICU staring at her tiny daughter behind the glass, she was distracted and agitated because she didn’t know what was happening with her wife. The idea that she could lose her beautiful brunette was something she had never considered until Dr. Comello had asked her what her instructions were before she left the ER and went to cut open her wife’s belly. How the hell is a person supposed to answer that question anyway? What the actual fuck?

‘If I have to make a decision, worst case scenario, what do you want me to do?’

That was what Patty had asked her. Jesus fucking Christ. And now the NICU nurses were talking to her and trying to tell her why her baby daughter looked yellow and was so small and had an oxygen mask strapped to her little face. Ashlyn wasn’t allowed to hold her yet but would be able to in a couple of hours once her lungs were working better. There was paperwork to fill out and a short list
to put together of people who were allowed to visit in the NICU. The keeper wasn’t sure what she signed or why but she felt some of the pain in her heart start to subside once she got her eyes on her new baby girl. It slowly became clearer to Ashlyn that their baby wasn’t going to die. She just needed some help until she could do more things on her own. It was still frightening to see her hooked up to so many wires and machines though. The keeper felt so far away from both of her girls. One of the nurses took a picture of the baby on Whitney’s phone for them so Ashlyn could show her wife that their daughter was alive and well and only going to get stronger.

After ninety minutes in the NICU, Ashlyn and Whitney returned to the waiting room where Sydney was waiting for them. It was just after 7am and the keeper was engulfed in hugs from both of Ali’s parents as soon as she stepped a few feet off of the elevator.

“Oh my God Ashlyn” Deb gasped out from inside the tight hug.

“How’s Ali?” was all the keeper could get out. It took enormous self-control to not push Deb and Ken away as she desperately sought an answer to her question. “How is she?” she asked again, looking straight at Sydney.

“We don’t know yet” Ken said, trying to keep his voice level as he pulled back from the hug.

“What do you mean?!” Ashlyn’s eyes went wild with fear. “It’s been almost two hours!”

“They’re still working on her Ash” Sydney said as the group moved towards her quickly. “Just try and stay calm, ok?”

“Hey, who wants to see a picture of the cutest little baby girl Krieger in the whole world?” Whitney asked as she stepped further into the waiting room, trying to distract everybody from the awful not-knowing that was tormenting them all.

She texted the picture to Sydney and they all looked on Sydney’s and Whitney’s phones and grinned. The mood shifted just a little bit and settled down some of the nerves that had just about fried Ashlyn’s brain a minute ago. Ryan was there, sitting with a bag of bagels and tray of coffees and some bottles of juice and Gatorade and water. Deb had brought a duffle bag with some clothes in it for her daughter-in-law, remembering at the last second that she had left the house in her pajamas. The keeper’s pajamas were covered in Ali’s blood, even as they stood there looking at the baby picture.

“Thanks Deb” the blonde said softly as she hugged her. “I’m sorry. I’m losing my mind. It’s making me crazy not knowing what’s going on with Ali.”

“You’re doing great honey” Deb soothed. “Why don’t you go get changed real quick and then come have some juice or something. We don’t want you passing out on us now too, do we?” She walked her to the nearby restroom. “Congratulations mama, you’ve got a baby girl” she grinned and hugged the blonde again.

“I’m so happy she’s ok” Ashlyn admitted quietly. “But I can’t really celebrate anything until...”

“I know” Deb interrupted, nodding her head. “I know. Go on now and get yourself taken care of. You’re going to be busier than a one-armed paper hanger here today taking care of your two girls. You’ll need your strength.”

The next 45 minutes allowed the keeper to eat and drink and put actual clothes on before the double doors swung open and Dr. Comello walked through them. Ashlyn swallowed the last bit of bagel in her mouth and stood up as her eyes searched the doctor’s face for any indication, good or bad.
Patty’s head was down as she tugged her mask off and the blonde felt like the bagel was going to come right back up. Her knees got a little weak as she stood there but Whitney was right by her side with her arm around her waist for support. As Patty took the last few steps towards Ashlyn it felt like time had come to a complete halt. The keeper could see how tired the doctor looked and she held her breath out of sheer terror.

“Ali’s in the recovery room” Patty finally said and the entire room exhaled and smiled nervously at each other. “She’s going to be fine Ash” the kind doctor reached for the keeper’s hands and squeezed them. “She lost a lot of blood and we almost had to remove her uterus, but we were able to save it.”

“What...what happened?”

Patty looked at all of the faces in the room and discreetly cleared her throat.

“Oh, right” Ashlyn realized the doctor was worried about Ali’s privacy. “Patty, Dr. Comello, these are Ali’s parents Deb and Ken.” She waited while they shook hands. “And this is my best friend Whitney and her husband Ryan.” More handshakes. “And you know this one” she smiled at Sydney as she got up and hugged the doctor she was seeing for her own pregnancy. “You can tell us. I’m just going to have to tell them what you say anyway” she tried to chuckle but couldn’t quite get there.

Ryan excused himself, gentleman that he was, and Ken followed him a short distance down the hall. He knew if it was something he needed to know that Deb would tell him. He didn’t want Ali to be embarrassed later if he heard something she didn’t want him to.

“Ali had a problem with the lining of her uterus. It was weak in certain spots and probably has been for a long time” the doctor explained. “When you’re pregnant the lining gets thicker to support the baby and then thins back down again after you have the baby. Well, it looks like the first pregnancy compounded the problem and made some of the weak spots even weaker. So when this baby finally got heavy enough and big enough she caused a tear in the uterine lining. That’s what caused the bleeding and put both Ali and the baby at risk.”

“Is that why she’s been so much more tired this time?” Ashlyn asked as she processed the information.

“Yes, and that’s why her iron levels were a little lower last week. Everything about this pregnancy was more difficult for her, and for the baby, because part of the support network inside the uterus, right inside the womb, wasn’t working very well. So Ali had to work harder to give the baby what she needed and the baby had to work harder to get what she needed from Ali.”

“Do you think those weak spots in the uterine lining could be what causes her to have those really painful periods she gets sometimes too?” the keeper asked, thinking back to how the frequency of those really painful episodes had increased since she’d had Drew. It used to happen once a year but it had become an every other month occurrence after her first pregnancy.

“Yes, that could definitely be the cause of it” Patty nodded at her.

“But she’s ok? She’s going to be ok?” Ashlyn’s voice was still desperate and exhausted.

“Yes. I expect her to make a full recovery.” Patty smiled at the four women standing in front of her. “She’ll be in recovery for a little while because she was under anesthesia for a few hours and she lost a lot of blood. We had to do a transfusion. I officially don’t recommend any more pregnancies but, technically, she could try again. But if I thought she was that careless I wouldn’t have made the
surgeon work so hard to save her uterus.”

“Why did you save it? Couldn’t you have just removed it?” Deb asked.

“Yes, and we came very close to having to remove it. But I believe if you can keep your reproductive organs where they belong, as long as they’re healthy, it’s better for your long-term health. If we had removed the uterus Ali may have needed hormone treatment therapy and I didn’t want to obligate her to taking a bunch of pills for the rest of her life if I didn’t have to. Especially without being able to talk with her about it first” the doctor explained.

“She was out the whole time?” Sydney asked.

“Yes. She came in unconscious and never regained consciousness. We put her under general anesthesia because we didn’t have time for anything else. And that’s why you weren’t in the room either Ash” she squeezed the blonde’s arm. “That’s the difference between a scheduled C-section and an Emergency C-section.”

“When can I see her?” Ashlyn’s voice was excited and antsy.

“She’ll be in recovery for an hour or so I’d guess. She’s strong but that was a tough situation she’s just been through” Patty answered. “And you did a great job too Ash. That’s a terrible position to be in and I don’t ever wish it on any of my patients, but you were brave and strong.” She was surprised when the keeper hugged her tightly for several seconds.

“Thank you so much for saving her Patty...for saving them both” her voice was a whisper, full of emotion.

After Dr. Comello made her exit and they sat down again to wait, Whitney asked the question they all wanted to know the answer to.

“What was she talking about Ash? What terrible position did she put you in?”

Ashlyn slumped back in her chair and closed her eyes. She rubbed her face roughly with both hands and then sighed heavily as she opened her weary eyes again. When she spoke they could barely hear her.

“She made me decide which of them to save if things went wrong during surgery.”

“Oh my God...”

“No fucking way...”

“What did you say?”

“I told her to save Ali.”
By the time Ashlyn finally got to see her wife it was just before 11am. It had taken Ali a long time in recovery but she was finally in the mother/baby suite. They were going to put her into a regular hospital room because the baby was in the NICU and wouldn’t be joining Ali right away but Ashlyn said absolutely not. They were hopeful that the baby would only need to be in the NICU for a few days and the keeper didn’t want to give up the mother/baby suite if she didn’t have to. Dr. Comello agreed.

“Ali” she choked out when she saw her love at long last.

Ashlyn ran to the side of the brunette’s bed and clutched her forearm as she pressed a tearful kiss to her forehead. Ali was still very pale and a little groggy. She opened her eyes when she heard her name and worked her tired face into a small smile when she saw her wife running towards the bed.

“Ashlyn” she said softly and closed her eyes as she nuzzled into the contact.

“Oh my God, I’m so happy to see you baby” she pulled back to look into Ali’s dull, brown eyes. There were tears streaming down the keeper’s cheeks as she cupped her wife’s face and rubbed her forearm. “I love you so much. Oh, I may never let you go ever again...” the rest of her words got stuck in her throat when she started to think about what almost happened. Ashlyn brought their lips together in a tender kiss and smiled when she felt her beautiful brunette kiss her back softly. “Please don’t ever scare me like that again. I can’t take it” she whispered against her lips.

“I love you too” Ali tried to hug the blonde but she had an IV in the back of her hand and a blood pressure monitor on the finger of her other hand and some other leads taped to her chest with wires. She had to settle for a pat and a squeeze of her wife’s hand as Ashlyn maneuvered her hand into Ali’s non-IV hand. “So much.”

“How do you feel? Are you in a lot of pain?”

“Not yet” Ali chuckled. “But soon. Very soon. I’m enjoying the tail end of some of the drugs. I had to have a c-section” she shared with wide eyes as if Ashlyn didn’t know anything about it.

“I know honey, I know.” Ashlyn smiled at her wife adoringly. “You did great. I can’t believe how strong you are woman” she shook her head and raised her eyebrows in wonder. “Unfuckingbelievable.”

“Where is she?” Ali asked, suddenly remembering the baby she had brought into the world a few hours earlier. She whipped her head around the room looking for the bassinet and tried to sit up. “Oh fuck” she groaned and slammed her eyes shut for a minute when the bolt of pain from her incision and her abdomen registered in her brain.

“Hey, just lie still now” Ashlyn tried to comfort her but had no idea how. She settled for another squeeze of her hand and a gentle head caress. “She’s in the NICU right now, but she’s doing just fine.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right” Ali laid her head back against the pillow and blinked up at her wife. “I forgot.”

“That’s ok baby” Ashlyn soothed. “You’re allowed. You’ve had a pretty tough morning” she smiled again.
“There she is” Dr. Comello’s voice floated into the room, softly at first, in case the patient was still out of it. “Sleeping beauty has awoken” she smiled at Ali as she approached the other side of the bed so Ashlyn wouldn’t have to move.

“Yep. Feeling extra beautiful today” the brunette quipped and returned the doctor’s smile as best she could. “How’s our baby girl?”

“She’s doing fine, getting stronger and better with each feeding. Right Ashlyn?” the doctor looked at the keeper for confirmation.

“Yes” Ashlyn reached for her phone and pulled up the picture she had taken from the last feeding about two hours ago. “See, here she is” she held the phone out so her wife could see the picture. Ali squinted at it. “Oh. Here, let me help you with your glasses.”

The keeper quickly cleaned the lenses and then slid Ali’s glasses onto her face so she could see. The brunette gasped when she saw the picture of Ashlyn in a sterile gown and cap holding up their small, 6-hour old daughter. The blonde had a huge grin on her face, complete with dimple, and the baby looked unhappy and uncomfortable like she was just about to start screaming her head off.

“Why is she yellow?” Ali asked, the alarm in her voice bringing everything else in her body to full attention. “Is she ok? I thought she was just in the NICU as a precaution because she’s ‘early term’?”

“It’s ok honey” Ashlyn tried to calm her wife down. “She’s doing really well and...”

“Patty?” Ali cut her wife off, wanting the professional’s answer at that particular moment.

“Ashlyn’s right” Patty said reassuringly. “Your daughter’s doing very well. She’s yellow because she has a little jaundice...”

“Jaundice?!”

“It’s ok Ali” the doctor patted her shoulder as she stood next to the bed. “It’s pretty common and usually not a very big deal. I think she’ll have it worked out in a couple of days, maybe three.”

“But why does she have it?”

“There’s a yellow pigment that we all produce called billrubin and our livers process it for us. Newborns’ livers don’t start doing that for a little while and if a baby is born a little early sometimes they need some extra nutrition to help them out.”

“Extra nutrition?” Ali’s brows furrowed and she started chewing her bottom lip.

“Ali, listen to me very carefully now, ok?” Dr. Comello looked expectantly at her patient and waited to continue until the brunette looked at her again. “You didn’t do anything wrong. You took excellent care of your baby while you were pregnant. Honestly, the fact that you’re both doing as well as you are right now is a testament to how strong you are and how well you took care of yourself and your daughter for as long as you possibly could.”

“Does she know about her uterus?” Ashlyn asked carefully.

“Yes. We talked about it just before she left the recovery room” Patty answered and then looked at Ali again.

“Because she was delivered at 37 weeks instead of 39 or 40 she needs a little help right now and that’s why she’s in the NICU. Her lungs needed some help getting everything cleared out right after
she was born – that’s why you couldn’t hold her right away Ash” she added with a glance at the blonde. “But they’re already much better and should be completely fine in another day. The jaundice will clear up too. The more she eats the better that will get. Feeding her helps pass the bilirubin through her system faster. Instead of every 3-1/2 hours you’re feeding her every 2-1/2 hours right?”

“Right” Ashlyn replied and looked at her phone. “I’m going back down in twenty minutes for the next one.”

“What about breastfeeding?” the brunette asked as her lips started to quiver.

“Unfortunately, you’re both a little anemic so that’s not an option” the doctor explained, knowing she was breaking Ali’s heart. “She’s on a special formula to help her get her iron levels up and help her get her red blood cell count up where it should be as well.”

Ali closed her eyes as silent tears fell down her cheeks. Ashlyn didn’t think she had ever seen her look so utterly forlorn.

“It’s ok sweetheart” she leaned over and kissed the side of her head. “I’m so sorry Al, I know how much you were looking forward to that.”

“Have you at least done skin to skin?” she asked in a tiny voice.

“Not yet” Dr. Comello answered. “She’s just not there quite yet. First priority was getting her lungs working better and we’ve done that. Step two is to get her eating and we’ve done that. Once she’s a little stronger and we don’t have to worry so much about infection then we can relax with the sterile gowns and things. That’s when you can get that skin to skin contact. And, hopefully, we can get her up here with you where she belongs.”

“When can I see her? When can I hold her?” Ali’s eyes had the beginnings of panic in them and Ashlyn glanced at the doctor nervously.

“Normally with a c-section Ashlyn could wheel you down in a wheelchair right now but I don’t want you sitting up just yet. You didn’t have a typical c-section Ali. A c-section is major surgery and when you add in the repair to your uterus...you’re going to need some time to get better too.”

“Patty, please. I need to see my baby” she pleaded.

“Can we bring her down on a gurney? They have that one room that’s big...” the keeper started to suggest.

“Yes. That’s just what I’m thinking” Patty nodded her head and started moving towards the door as she spoke.

There was a room that was big enough to fit a hospital gurney and they used it for scheduled c-section moms to bring their newborns down to the NICU if the baby’s needs weren’t life-threatening. It gives the mom and baby a little bit of time to bond and breastfeed during the ride before the baby gets officially registered into the NICU.

“But listen” she wheeled around and pointed menacingly at her patient. “You are not to move a muscle and you are not to lift a thing. Ashlyn or one of the nurses will pick her up and place her in your well-supported arms. You are not going to be popping stitches that the surgeon and I spent a whole bunch of time putting in. Is that clear?”

“Yes, I promise” Ali replied with her first real grin of the day.
“I expect you to enforce these rules” she gave Ashlyn a stern look.

“Got it doc. I’m on it.”

Ali didn’t get to hold and feed her baby until the next feeding at 2:30pm because they couldn’t get her down there fast enough and they didn’t want to make the baby wait for her feeding. Not when it was so important to curing both the jaundice and the anemia. To say the brunette was frustrated was an understatement. Everybody else that had been waiting around all morning to see Ali was happy because that meant they could go in and check on her while Ashlyn went back down to the NICU. At one point it was just Ali, Deb and Sydney in the room and the brunette’s agitation level was still pretty high. Both women were eager to distract her from the stressful waiting game she was being forced to play before she could hold her baby for the first time.

“So what about her name?” Sydney asked even though she was pretty sure she knew what they had chosen. “I know I’m already her godmother but ‘Sydney Rae’ has a really nice ring to it” she smirked and then laughed along with Deb.

“I don’t know if we’re having a big name reveal thing or what” Ali sighed and squeezed the bridge of her nose for a few seconds. “It’s all messed up now because she’s down there and I’m up here...”

“Hey, nothing’s messed up Alex” Deb said softly but firmly. “You’re alive and she’s alive and that’s all that matters. Amen, thank you Jesus.”

“I’ll second that” Sydney agreed as she squeezed her best friend’s hand. “Because, let me tell you” her voice got choked up and tears sprang to the corners of her eyes as she spoke, “there was a time this morning where we were not sure about either of those things.”

“You guys really thought she wasn’t going to make it?” Ali asked, her eyes wide with the realization of how serious the situation must have been that morning.

“No, you!” Sydney’s eyes bugged out and she bent down and kissed Ali’s hand. “You almost died you big dope” she whispered as her tears fell.

“Was it that serious?”

“Alex, it was very serious. I had flashbacks to your heart attacks and I...” Deb couldn’t go on so she got up and gave her daughter the biggest hug she could. “I love you so much baby girl.”

The brunette’s emotions swelled as the first two women she had ever loved held her safely in their embrace. She was overcome with love and gratitude and a weird, anxious kind of happiness. She let the moment last a bit longer and then finally spoke.

“Josephine Marie Krieger.” She paused and watched the two other faces beam back at her. “We’ll call her Josie. And the Marie is for Gram. It was her middle name too.”

Sydney knew that Josephine had always been one of Ali’s favorite names for her future daughter. Ashlyn had been an easy convert. She loved the name and thought it would be fun to see which of the numerous nicknames their daughter would eventually settle on as she grew up. Jo, JoJo, Joey...

Ali stayed in the hospital until Thursday afternoon. Normally she would have been released, assuming she met all of her post-operative requirements, after three or four days. But she stayed in the hospital for six days because of her more complicated surgery. The first two days were the worst, Saturday and Sunday. Ali was grumpy and sad and in a lot of pain from the surgery. She had a six-inch long incision across her lower abdomen that ran from left to right. Dr. Comello had performed a fairly textbook c-section delivery as far as the baby herself had been concerned. The hard, dangerous
work had begun after the delivery as she had a surgeon come in to repair the tear in Ali’s uterine wall.

The good news was that Ali had successfully avoided her second episiotomy! She hadn’t had to push for even a minute. She was unconscious and then anesthetized for the duration and never felt a thing. She was immensely grateful to not have the bruising and swelling between her legs like she had last time. That was the silver lining in all of this. Of course, Ali would gladly have endured an episiotomy if it meant she had been able to hold her baby girl to her chest a few minutes after she had been born. The brunette would have traded all of the silver lining to be able to breastfeed her newborn daughter.

The bad news was she was left recovering from the surgery and the anesthesia like anybody else who had major surgery. The nurses had her up on her feet late Sunday afternoon to try and get everything inside of her moving and functioning again. Ali took her pain pills to help with everything. And her stool softener pills and anti-gas pills to help while her body worked through the side effects of general anesthesia. And even some extra vitamins to get her own iron levels back up too. Even though she hadn’t delivered vaginally she was still going to be bleeding and draining for a while, just like last time. Her uterine contractions and cramps were incredibly painful because of the repair work the surgeon had done. But there was nothing to be done about them. As her uterus shrank back to its’ normal size and shape she was going to be having those contractions and cramps and she was just going to have to get through it. Ali learned quickly to have an extra pillow handy at all times in case she had to sneeze or cough or laugh or toot. If she didn’t hold the pillow against her abdomen when any of those things happened she was reduced to a crying puddle of tears and curse words in a matter of seconds.

In addition to that, she wouldn’t be able to breastfeed and that meant she had to wait for her milk to let down and then not be used so her hormones would respond and stop producing the breastmilk. That took 7-10 days and in the meantime, her breasts were full and uncomfortable. One of them started to become engorged after five days and she had to express some of the milk just for a little relief. She cried her eyes out as she watched the breastmilk run down the shower drain. It was a rough week physically and emotionally for the new mother.

Dr. Comello wouldn’t let Ali sit in the wheelchair until Monday morning so she was left helpless in her mother/baby suite with no baby for the whole weekend. The upside to this was that Ali could sleep. During those first two nights, Ashlyn slept on the cot in the suite with her phone under her pillow and set the alarm to vibrate so she wouldn’t wake her wife up when she went down to the NICU. She knew Ali’s body needed the rest. She also knew Dr. Comello had purposefully not allowed Ali into a wheelchair until Monday morning just so she could get that rest. She knew that as soon as Ali was allowed to go to the NICU in her wheelchair that she would insist on being at every feeding. That weekend the brunette alternated between bitchy and sad and not even she was sure which it was going to be each time. Deb and Sydney both came to visit her each day, spacing them out so they both weren’t there at the same time. They tried to give Ashlyn all the support they could too. They both knew what a tough spot the blonde was in. It was almost harder on Ashlyn because she was exhausted from feeding the baby every two and a half hours and then she would try to take care of Ali for the two hours before the next feeding in between. And the brunette was not very happy about any of it. But Ashlyn never complained once. She had never been more grateful in her life to have Ali, in whatever mood, nearby.

Monday morning the keeper had to help her wife take her first post-partum shower and that did not go well at all. Ali was agitated and feeling useless and was extra stubborn as she insisted on trying to take the shower by herself. Standing up after abdominal surgery for any length of time was incredibly painful, especially for the first few days. It got better every day but standing to take a shower and trying to wash her long hair by herself two days after surgery was one of the dumbest
things the brunette had ever done.

“Al, there’s a stool that folds down so you can sit on it” Ashlyn patiently explained from just outside the shower curtain in the bathroom of their mother/baby suite. She had offered to help her shower but Ali was hellbent on doing it herself and the keeper had no choice but to let her try. “Will you please let me help you honey? I know you’re tough as nails but now is not the time to push it.” Still no response from the shower. She waited another few minutes before trying again. “At least let me wash your hair for you Ali. I don’t want you to pop a stitch. And stretching up to your hair is going to be really painful.”

The blonde was ready to step in. She had locked the bathroom door behind her and was standing there in her sports bra and boxer briefs with her hair up and out of the way. Another painfully long minute went by until she finally heard her poor wife crying in the shower. She couldn’t wait another second.

“I’m coming in” she announced before sliding the shower curtain open. Ali was bent over with her hands on her knees, which might have been the only position more painful than standing straight up and down. “Jesus Al” she breathed out as her heart clenched. “Here sweetheart, sit down” she urged as she unfolded the bench seat from the wall and lowered it into position. She held Ali by the arm and guided her back towards the stool. “Do you want me to put a towel down on it so it’s softer?”

“No, that’s ok” the brunette squeaked out, her voice frail and defeated.

“That’s ok, everything’s going to be ok Al, I promise” she tried to soothe her distraught brunette as she got on her knees in front of her with the soap and started washing her feet and legs. “I love you so much princess.”

Ali didn’t say anything for the rest of the fifteen minutes they were in the shower but she touched her keeper and expressed her gratitude through a gentle squeeze on her forearm or her shoulder, depending on what the closest body part was. She rested her hand against Ashlyn’s knee as she carefully washed her pretty but sad face. Between Ali’s foul mood and post-operative body, it was the most they had touched in over two days. The brunette had declined all of Ashlyn’s offers of massages up to that point and the keeper hadn’t pushed it. She knew her wife was going through her own version of hell and wasn’t about to tell her how to do it. She had read about how devastating it was for some women who couldn’t breastfeed, especially after having done it once with a previous
baby.

“Just think, this time tomorrow we’ll have her here with us where she belongs” Ashlyn offered hopefully as she carefully dried her off.

The only time Ali was happy was when she had her baby girl in her arms. Those times made up for everything else during those six days. Bright and early Monday morning, even before the shower adventure, the brunette had her keeper wheel her down to the NICU for the very first time since her brief trip on the gurney. She cried tears of joy when she finally got that skin to skin contact she had been craving for two solid days. Ali was able to feed her and burp her and then hold her against her bare chest for a while. It felt so strange to have her breasts be full of milk and every fiber of her being telling her to teach her daughter how to breastfeed, and then hold a bottle for her instead. The brunette knew millions of women didn’t or couldn’t breastfeed and she knew that formula from a bottle had grown and raised billions and billions of babies all over the world. She knew all of that. And still her heart ached over the loss of that special time she was never going to have with her daughter. Even as she grieved that loss she could hear another voice in her head chastising her for being so greedy and ungrateful. Both she and Josie were alive and doing well after a harrowing experience that could have cost either, or both, of them their lives. Ali would learn to be ok with the bottle. She would learn to love the bottle as more time passed. It would just take time.

Josie’s jaundice was almost cleared up by Monday afternoon. Her lungs were working normally. Her anemia would take longer to cure completely but she was making good progress there too. And she was eating and peeing and pooping like a pro. That all meant that she could be moved to the mother/baby suite Tuesday morning as hoped. It was like Christmas in June! Both Ali and Ashlyn were beyond thrilled to have their little family unit together for the first time. Of course they missed Drew terribly, but he was where he needed to be. He was too little to have at the hospital and Ali wasn’t strong enough to do anything with him. And Ashlyn was too busy to do anything with him. That’s part of why Deb was there before Ali gave birth that summer anyway. She was going to help with anything they needed, obviously, but primarily Drew. Ken and Vicki had both offered to help, as had Whitney and Sydney as well. Ashlyn and Ali had already talked about using the awesome village they had around them to help with their young family that summer. They knew they were going to need some help. And that was before Ali’s unplanned surgery.

“I can’t believe how red her hair is” Ali whispered as she held her daughter against her chest and softly ran her hand over the medium orange hair on her head. “I can’t believe how much bigger she’s gotten in just three days” Ashlyn chimed in with a smile, voice hushed so as not to disturb the sleeping infant.

They were in the mother/baby suite on Tuesday afternoon and both feeling the relief of not having to go anywhere. No more rushing down to the NICU to feed or change or hold their baby girl. Ashlyn was sitting on the cot she had been sleeping in and was texting her family with the latest update. Ali was in her hospital bed, propped up and grinning from ear to ear at the surprising red head on her chest. Josie was small but not tiny, she had been an ‘early term’ baby and not a premature or ‘premie’ baby. Her hair was thin and straight but definitely orange and she had light blue eyes and very fair skin. She had a light, tan colored birthmark that covered most of the left side of her neck. Dr. Comello had called it a ‘café au lait’ spot and explained that it was a pigmentation birthmark rather than a vascular birthmark. The vascular birthmarks were usually red. There was nothing to worry about with Josie’s birthmark. But they needed to watch her as she got older and if she developed six or more of the spots they should make sure she didn’t have something more serious like neurofibromatosis. If she got more than six and they were big enough it could be an indication of the disease. Whitney had done some research on the birthmark and found that some people call Josie’s type a ‘giraffe spot’. They all agreed they liked that better than ‘café au lait’, even though that name
perfectly described the color of the actual birthmark.

“Dad says one of Uncle Scott’s boys had red hair when he was a baby but it eventually turned brown like the rest of us. Maybe there’s some strawberry blonde haired, blue-eyed German in our blood after all?” Ali wondered.

“That’s the mystery of those recessive genes, right?” Ashlyn said without looking up, typing into her phone. “You just never know, especially with the donor adding to the surprise.”

They were quiet for a few minutes as the keeper emailed her coach about missing her second game in a row. The one in four days, an away game in Los Angeles, would have been her start too. Josie’s early birthday also meant the couple had missed Sarah and Erin’s wedding which was also Saturday June 19th. When they were a no-show Sarah and Erin got nervous and the architect texted Sydney to check in. By late Saturday evening everybody was safe and relatively healthy so the coach was able to give the newlyweds the happy baby news without any of the drama. She would let Ali tell Sarah the rest of the story if and when she wanted to.

“I feel like I cheated her out of the birth she was supposed to have” Ali finally admitted without taking her eyes off of her daughter. “The struggle of birth and fighting your way through the birth canal is supposed to be so good for them. I feel like I let her down.”

Ashlyn looked at her two girls thoughtfully before getting up and standing next to the hospital bed. She put her hand on Ali’s shoulder and squeezed it gently as she lightly touched Josie’s little blanket-covered bum with her other hand. The blonde couldn’t decide if she should lighten the mood or try to talk with her wife about what she had just said.

“Al, I can’t even go there with you” she started, trying to keep her voice steady. The keeper was still very upset about the events that led to Josie’s birth and knew she would be for a long time to come. “I get what you’re saying but honey,” she paused and took a breath to steady herself, “you almost died. She almost died. I know you were unconscious so you don’t have any memory of it, but...fuck.”

Ali grabbed her wife’s hand and held it tightly as she watched her favorite face struggle to stay composed. Ashlyn was right and the brunette knew it. All she remembered was getting into the car and struggling to stay awake. She knew the keeper was driving much too fast but she really wanted her to go faster. The last image she saw before she passed out was Ashlyn’s frantic, panicked face as she drove them to the hospital in the middle of the night. They hadn’t had a chance to talk very much about the events that occurred in the early hours of that Saturday morning. They both knew they would, eventually, but maybe that week wasn’t the right time. Ashlyn seemed determined to focus on the present and was almost in a sort of denial about what had happened. Ali was oblivious to it because she had no idea how traumatic it had been for her wife. Before she could decide what to say, Ashlyn spoke again.

“I think she struggled enough while she was inside you, trying to get what she needed to grow, and then I know she fought hard through her own version of a birth canal while we were getting you here...” she inhaled sharply as her emotions swirled. “You both fought like hell to be here, right here with me today, and I think our little girl is going to be tougher than both of us put together.” Ashlyn kissed Josie’s head and smiled at her baby scent and then pressed a meaningful kiss to her wife’s lips too. “I can’t see how you could possibly feel like you let her down. You literally gave her everything you had sweetheart. If your body hadn’t been so strong for all those months...well, I can’t go there either.” She stiffened and then shook off the horrible thought that they might have lost the baby in the middle of her pregnancy. “You’re my hero baby” she squeaked out. “And I’ll never be able to thank you for bringing her to us.”
Ashlyn buried her face in Ali’s neck and let the brunette hold the back of her head and caress it. They stayed like that for a few minutes until the keeper realized she was probably putting Ali in an uncomfortable position, physically.

“Oh, shit, I’m sorry.” Ashlyn stood up and wiped the tears from her face. “That can’t be comfortable. And I cried on you too.” She took the edge of the sheet and brought it up to pat Ali’s neck dry.

“Ash, babe, it’s ok, forget about my neck” she took her hand again and looked into those beautiful hazel eyes. “You’re my hero. If you hadn’t gotten us here...”

“Don’t” Ashlyn stopped her with a shake of her head and a squeeze of her hand. “Please, don’t. I can’t think about that. I can’t...I just don’t have time to fall apart right now.”

The keeper straightened up and took a deep breath, closing her eyes for a few seconds.

“Ashlyn, are you ok?” Ali’s voice was full of concern for her sensitive keeper. She was just starting to understand that her wife was struggling with more than just sleep deprivation.

“I’m fine. I’m just tired” Ashlyn smiled weakly. “Besides, I’ve got both of you here with me now and nothing else matters.”

Josie woke up and started to cry, right on cue, as she asked for her next meal. Her little face wrinkled up as she wailed and shook her tiny arms. Ali watched her keeper warm up a bottle of formula and bring it back to the hospital bed. Ashlyn helped the brunette reposition the baby in her arms so she could feed her and then handed Ali the bottle with a soft smile.

“Look at my beautiful girls” she said softly as Josie started sucking on the bottle. “My strong warrior princesses.”
On Thursday, Ashlyn helped her wife out of the wheelchair and into her car for the drive back to the big old house. The keeper had loaded things into the trunk earlier in the day and gotten the car seat situated in the back seat for sweet little Josie. She was fast asleep, already buckled in, as Ashlyn held onto the hospital sheet that she had folded and tucked over the front passenger seat as Ali carefully maneuvered herself onto it.

“What’s with the sheet?” she gave the blonde a confused frown and then winced when her arm hit her still very tender stomach.

“Uh, well, I haven’t driven it since...we got here” she swallowed, unsure why she couldn’t just tell Ali the seat was ruined because of all of her blood on it. “And I forgot and then when I came out to load things up I tried to clean it but it wouldn’t come off...”

“Babe, what are you even talking about?” Ali chuckled at how oddly her wife was behaving.

“The blood.”

“Oh” the brunette said quietly. “Right.”

It wasn’t the best way to start what should have been a triumphant ride home, but they couldn’t pretend Ali hadn’t almost bled to death in that seat six days earlier. Well, they could and Ashlyn had been trying to pretend for all six days, but not while Ali was sitting in the same, blood-stained seat again.

“I promise, I’ll drive much slower this time” Ashlyn joked, trying to lighten the mood.

“Good idea” Ali smiled in reply and reached over to take her wife’s hand.

They looked at each other for a moment and then the brunette puckered her lips and leaned a little bit over the console, looking for a kiss but not able to span the whole distance herself. Stretching and bending her midsection hurt too much. Ashlyn brought their lips together in a sweet kiss.

“I love you so much baby” she mumbled against Ali’s lips.

“I love you too.”

To say the adjustment period at home was rough would be a gross understatement. The first problem was that the house wasn’t quite ready yet for baby #2. Ali and Ashlyn thought they had two more weeks, or maybe even more, to do their final preparations. The nursery was set up but Ali had planned to wash all of the linens for the bassinet and crib and the burp cloths and towels and wash cloths that weekend they spent in the hospital. The refrigerator hadn’t been re-arranged yet to house the bottles they would need to feed little Josie. There were a dozen small things that Ali had on her list, and four others that Ashlyn had on her list, that hadn’t been completed yet. Josie was smaller than they expected so Ashlyn had to go out and buy a bunch of diapers that were the correct size for their early term baby girl. They had planned to have Deb bring Drew to the hospital to meet his new baby sister the day after the birth, but the emergency C-section and the three days in the NICU had ruined those plans. By the time Drew would have been able to see Josie, Tuesday afternoon, there would only have been a day and a half before Ashlyn brought her girls home anyway. She and Ali decided to just wait until they got home to have the big introduction.

Drew had been a little terror for Deb while Ali and Ashlyn had been in the hospital. Grandma hadn’t
wanted to bother them with anything having to do with the house or the dogs or their son, so she called Sydney for help. Drew hadn’t seen either of his moms since Ashlyn put him to bed Friday night and he was missing them both. They had facetime him every night, and often more times during the day, but it just wasn’t quite the same. Sydney and Whitney both drove up to the big old house to help Deb that week. Sandi Leroux came over too. Whitney wrote out the instructions for feeding the dogs and stuck the piece of paper to the wall in the mudroom just above where their food bowls were. She also went and made sure the house was stocked for all of the basics like toilet paper, dog food, etc. Sydney brought Cash up to play with Drew and that helped immensely. Drew always loved playing with Cash, no matter what other changes he had going on in his life. Cash would be turning 4 years old in September and was getting ready to go to pre-school then too. He was very capable of entertaining young Drew.

In anticipation of the new baby’s arrival, Ashlyn had been reading to her son a lot when she put him to bed at night and during play time too. Ali was usually so tired that the blonde took over most of the evening activities. They had six different books about being a big brother or a big sister and having a new baby come to live with you at your house. They read them repeatedly and talked with Drew about the change that was coming for all of them. Ali encouraged her son to talk to his baby sister while she was still inside mommy’s belly and he did, when he felt like it. She tried to involve him in as many things as she could that were baby related.

“What does the baby want to drink Drew?” she would ask him as she went to get herself a beverage from the refrigerator. “Juice or water?”

“Ummm, juice!” he would answer excitedly and amble over to help her look in the fridge, wrapping his arm around her thigh and leaning against her leg at the same time.

“Ooh, good choice. I think she’ll like that very much. What a good big brother you are” she would compliment him and lovingly run her hand across the back of his head.

The fact that a baby girl was coming into their lives was absolutely not a mystery to the 2-year old but he still seemed surprised at all the changes that took place in the house as well as their lives. The biggest issue he had was missing time with his moms. All the books warned them it would happen, as had everybody they knew with more than one child. Both Ashlyn and Ali were prepared to make time for Drew each day, special one on one time, just to make sure he knew he was still important and loved. Even still, he got frustrated and angry when he couldn’t have Ashlyn’s undivided attention whenever he wanted it because she was feeding or changing Josie. He had his first hissy-fit three days after they got home, when he couldn’t crawl onto Ali’s lap because her incision was still very sore and her body was still healing. It took the keeper several minutes to get him calmed down in his room before bringing him back to their bedroom so he could see Ali.

“Sweet boy, you can’t sit on mommy right now” Ashlyn tried to explain, again. “She has an ouchie on her belly and she’s very sore so we have to be very very gentle with her. Ok?”

The keeper moved towards their bed to try and intercept the boy before he could cause Ali pain. The baby was asleep in the bassinette next to Ali’s side of the bed and the brunette was sitting up against the headboard resting.

“I want mommy” he whined and started to climb on Ali.

Neither of them was sure when exactly it had happened or why, but he had started to call Ali ‘mommy’ earlier in the year. They assumed he had picked it up at daycare but they couldn’t be certain. Cash called Sydney ‘mommy’ so he could have learned it that way too. Nobody cared. It was sort of what they wanted to happen – Drew choosing what to call each of them, he stuck with ‘mama’ for Ashlyn. And nobody would be surprised if he changed his mind back again either.
“Drew” the brunette put her arm out and held onto one of his as it flailed towards her stomach. “Sweetie, why don’t you come sit next to me and we can watch a show together” she offered quietly. “But we have to be quiet so we don’t wake the baby up ok?”

Ashlyn frowned at the situation, her defense mechanism up and running to protect both Ali and Josie from the toddler. She was trying to be patient but he also needed to follow the few rules they had implemented in the three days they had been home. One of which had been, don’t climb on mommy and be very gentle with mommy. She got her temper under control and brought over two extra pillows so Ali could put them between she and her son to protect herself and offer him something soft instead of her lap.

“Thank you mama” the brunette said as she positioned the pillows and then smiled at her son. “What should we watch?”

It wasn’t exactly what he wanted but once Ali wrapped her arm around him and tucked him into her side, protected by the pillows, it became an acceptable substitute. And she had given him a decision to make about what show to watch so his little mind was already on to that challenge. The keeper finished putting the clean laundry away after getting the tv set up for them. She stopped next to the bed on her way to the backstairs and smiled at her wife and children.

“Mama too?” Drew asked with a small pout and patted his little hand on the bed next to him.

Ashlyn had eight other things that she really needed to do that afternoon, like pay the bills, pick up the dog poop from the backyard, go grocery shopping and order a new passenger seat for her car. But she couldn’t resist the adorable request. When Deb came up the backstairs an hour later to tell them that dinner was ready she smiled at the sweet sight on the bed. Drew was leaning against the pillows wide awake and watching the tv while both of his moms were asleep, heads leaning against each other and the pillows and headboard they were resting on. The sweet moments were very sweet and not so far between during that last week of June. But there were just as many temper tantrums and both Ali and Ashlyn wondered if they could keep their cool long enough for their son to adapt to his new normal.

The keeper went back to training that Monday morning with the Breakers to get ready for their home game on Wednesday night against Orlando. It was Abby Smith’s start so Ashlyn wouldn’t be playing, but she wanted to get back with the team because they weren’t having their typical successful season so far and they really needed her presence in the locker room. By the end of June, after that Orlando game and win, their record was 7 wins, 6 losses and 1 draw for a total of 22 points. The previous two seasons they had 2 losses total for each season, and 4 losses total the year before that. They had to go back to 2017 for another season where they had 6 losses, and that was the total for the year! To say they were missing Whitney Engen was another understatement but they were suffering the loss of some other veterans as well. Ashlyn was the oldest player on the team now that Tiffany Weimer had retired after the 2019 season. Tasha Dowie and Angela Salem were both 33 years old this season and fighting for playing time on the pitch. They had both lost their starting spots but were usually the first two subs off the bench depending on whether the team needed an offensive boost or a steadying hand, respectively. Amanda DaCosta was 32 but had retired after only a month of this season. She had played through a nagging back injury for the past several seasons and when she re-injured it early in May she hung up her boots. Julie King, the team captain, and Allysha Chapman were both 32 as well and only Julie was a starter. Even Kristie Mewis, one of the longest tenured Breakers was 30 years old now and not getting any younger. She and Julie were the vocal leaders on the pitch in the starting line-up and, as passionate and talented as they were, they weren’t Whitney Engen or Tasha Dowie. Both Julie and Kristie knew things were going to be different that year but they were surprised at how quickly things had changed for the team.
Ashlyn’s ardent hope was that the team could hold on through the three games they had left before the FIFA break for the EUROs. Then she would enjoy the three-week break and focus on her family before they all came back the second week of August to right the ship and get the Breakers back on track and, hopefully, headed for the playoffs. It would be a tough task but the keeper was sure as hell not going to just give up on the team or the season because she had to split starts with Abby Smith or was missing her best friend. Fuck that.

Ali wanted to go back to the way they had handled Drew’s first month at home – she wanted to get up every three hours for the feedings and let Ashlyn sleep at night so she didn’t get injured during trainings or games. But the brunette wasn’t allowed to pick anything up yet and wouldn’t be allowed to until she was cleared at her three-week postpartum appointment with Dr. Comello. If her incision looked good and the rest of the exam went well, then the doctor would allow Ali to start lifting the baby and doing other lightweight things around the house. She still had to go back for her 6-week postpartum appointment to get the final all-clear to resume her normal activities, including sex and working out and lifting and carrying heavier things. Because she was recovering from major surgery, Ashlyn wouldn’t let Ali do anything the way they had done it with Drew. The keeper insisted on sleeping with the baby bassinet on her side of the bed so she could pick Josie up quickly in the middle of the night and feed her or put her in her wife’s arms so she could feed her the bottle. Ashlyn’s alarm would go off, silently vibrating to wake her up without disturbing Ali or Josie just yet, and she would go downstairs and get a bottle ready. Then she would come back upstairs and wake Josie up to feed her, usually sitting in the glider because it was easier to stay awake there than in bed. It became obvious to the blonde that there was no sense waking Ali up at night at all for those first three weeks. The brunette, of course, disagreed.

“That’s just crazy!” Ali yelled, her frustration boiling over as she argued with her wife in their bedroom.

“It’s not crazy. It makes perfect sense and if you weren’t being so stubborn you’d see that!” Ashlyn yelled back, equally frustrated. “I’ll get up with her at night and you get your sleep so you can get your strength back and your body can heal” the keeper explained again as she paced back and forth at the foot of the bed. “Then your mom can help you with her during the day when you’re both awake and fully rested. You’ll also have Drew and the dogs to take care of so you’re really getting the raw end of the deal if you think about it.”

She looked at the angry face on her beautiful brunette, propped up against some pillows in bed, and tried to smile but couldn’t quite manage it. Ali’s frown was severe and she opened her mouth to counter Ashlyn’s argument but the blonde cut her off.

“Don’t! Just, don’t say anything for a minute Al.” Ashlyn’s voice was tired and flat as she finished her sentence and sat down on Ali’s side of the bed next to her wife’s legs. “I know you’re upset about not being able to breastfeed. I get it, well, I don’t get it but I know it’s a big deal and I know it’s really bothering you honey. I know it is, and I’m sorry” she put her hand on Ali’s thigh and rubbed it gently as she spoke. She watched her favorite cinnamon eyes start to tear up. “I know you’re hurting still from the surgery too. And from everything else going on inside as your body changes again. And I know you’re fucking frustrated because you can’t do anything yet. You can’t even pick up your own daughter whenever the hell you want to” she smiled when Ali reached down and took her hand as the tears fell down her cheeks. “I know you’re miserable right now baby...I know you are and I wish I could make any part of it better for you. But I can’t.”

“Oh fuck” Ali exhaled and clutched the pillow tightly to her stomach to try and muffle some of the pain she felt there as she cried. “I’ve never felt more useless in my whole life” she admitted in a tiny voice as her lip quivered. “I can’t feed her, I can’t pick her up and take care of her, I can’t...”
“But you can sweetheart, you can do all of those things with some help. You just need some help for
another couple of weeks until Patty clears you. And that’s why your mom’s here. So just let her help
you during the day and I’ll take care of the nights...”

“But Ash, you need your sleep more than any of us.”

“It’s just for a couple of weeks” the keeper smiled and squeezed Ali’s hand. “Once your three-week
appointment comes around you’ll be able to pick her up and then we can make a new plan. Besides,
coach knows what’s going on. He’s happy to give Abby the starts. I probably won’t even travel with
the team until after the EUROs anyway. But he wants me at trainings” she explained with a soft
smile. “It’ll be ok for a couple of weeks. Ok?”

“Let’s try it for one week and then talk about it again. I’ll try that but I can’t promise anything” Ali
offered with a sad, defeated look on her face.

Ashlyn knew it was the best she was going to get so she quickly agreed. They sat there together for
another half hour figuring out the daily schedule with the eight different feedings, one every three
hours. The more time she had to think about things, the more Ali had to agree that it really was the
smartest choice for everybody. She felt guilty as the days went by and when she tried to talk to the
blonde about making a change after the first week, Ashlyn had reminded her that their roles were
reversed with Drew. Ali had gotten up two and sometimes three times a night to feed him so Ashlyn
could get a good night’s sleep. The shoe was simply on the other foot this time around. It was high-
level teamwork in action. Maybe if her emotions and hormones weren’t so fucked up she could have
seen it more clearly. But the brunette was truly struggling and those closest to her could see it.

“It’s a good system you’ve got going on here” Sydney nodded approvingly at the end of the first
week.

It was Saturday, July 3rd and she and her family were visiting the big old house for the Horribles
parade and fireworks later that night. Dom, Whitney, Deb and Sandi had taken Cash and Drew to
the parade for a few hours, leaving Ali, Ashlyn and Sydney home with little Josie.

“Yeah, I guess” Ali replied somberly as she watched her best friend feed Josie a bottle. They were
side by side on the couch in the living room and Persey, Fred and Boss were curled up in different
places throughout the room with them. Ashlyn was stretched out on the other side of the couch, fast
asleep. “I’m just so...fucking pissed.”

“Ok” Sydney raised both eyebrows. “Interesting response...”

“It’s not funny Syd” Ali snapped.

“I’m not laughing” she replied with a challenging quirk of her eyebrow. “Down boo, down.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been so fucking mad about...” she struggled to find the right word to finish
her sentence, which only aggravated her more. “Aaarrggghhh” she groaned.

Her groan made Josie yelp and choke a little bit and all three dogs lifted their heads in alarm. Ashlyn
never moved a muscle.

“Seriously?” Sydney shot her a stern look and took the bottle away from the baby as she burped her
to make sure she wouldn’t choke again. “Cool it Als, you’re freaking my godchild out.” It took a
couple of minutes but Josie settled down and hungrily took the bottle back between her lips. “What
are you so mad about anyway?” the coach asked cautiously.

Ali spent the next fifteen minutes trying to explain how useless and helpless and frustrated she felt
and how she didn’t know what to do about it. She told her best friend how guilty she felt about Ashlyn getting up every night and how disconnected she felt from her own daughter.

“But you spend all day with her while Ash is at training, right?” Sydney clarified, wanting to make sure she had all the facts before saying something that would only piss her bestie off even more.

“Yeah, I know but...it’s different.”

“It’s only different because you’re letting it be different” Sydney countered. “You’re stuck on something up here” she tapped lightly at her own head as she spoke. “Better get it figured out so you can get past it before it gets too big.”

“I don’t feel the same bond with her that I did with Drew. I mean, besides the breastfeeding.”

“Ashlyn bonded just fine with Drew and she never breastfed him. Don’t make excuses Alibaba” the coach called the brunette on her bullshit and withstood the withering glare she got for her troubles. “You can be mad at me all you want. I can take it. But you need to get yourself right. I wouldn’t want to bond with you either if you’re all mopey and sad and angry all the time.”

“Fuck you Syd” the brunette snapped again, hurt by the coach’s harsh, truthful words.

“I love you too boo” Sydney winked at the brunette. “You don’t have to figure everything out on your own you know. Maybe you should go see Mattie and talk through everything with her.”

“I don’t have postpartum depression or anything” she said defensively.

“I never said you did. I’m telling you that you don’t seem like yourself and if you don’t want to talk to me about it that’s cool. Just talk to somebody so you can get better.”

Ali brought both hands to her face and rubbed it with a quieter groan.

“What does she think?” the coach nodded towards the keeper’s sleeping form.

“Who knows?” Ali sighed heavily. “I haven’t seen her all week. We’re on opposite schedules, remember?” she frowned.

Ashlyn and Ali had barely seen each other in six long days and nights. The keeper was sleeping in the twin bed in the nursery with Josie so Ali could get her sleep in their room. If they were lucky, Ashlyn would remember to kiss her wife goodbye before she left for training in the morning. When she got home in the afternoon she played with Drew even though she was supposed to be napping before family dinnertime. Then she would give Drew his bath and do his nighttime routine. And then she would collapse into bed for a couple of hours before Ali came up to bed for the night after Josie’s 10pm feeding. The keeper would get up, hopefully remember to kiss her wife goodnight, and go sleep in the nursery until she had to get up at 1am for the next feeding. The couple had a well-documented history of not functioning well if they ever got too disconnected from each other. That’s when the miscommunications and hurt feelings and misunderstandings happened. They felt very far apart from one another and neither woman was very happy. They both loved their baby girl and were beyond thrilled that she had joined the family. It wasn’t really about her at all. It was about them and how little they felt like themselves those days. Sydney was right, Ali thought to herself that afternoon, maybe she should go and see Mattie. Maybe both she and Ashlyn should go talk things over with their therapist.

“Ali!!” Ashlyn yelled loudly from deep in her sleep, startling everybody in the room.

“Noooooooo!!!!!”
She woke with a start, sitting up abruptly, disoriented and frightened. There was a look of terror on her face that both Sydney and Ali found alarming. They watched as the blonde blinked wildly and looked around the room to get her bearings. Then they saw her burst into tears and start sobbing uncontrollably as she buried her face in her hands. They weren’t really sure if Ashlyn knew they were even there. Ali got up and sat down next to her distraught wife and tried to comfort her through her sobs. Ashlyn’s face was very pale and her breathing was labored and heavy as she tried to catch her breath. The brunette put her arm around her wife’s shaking shoulders and patted her arm with her other hand.

“Shhhh, babe, you’re ok. You’re safe here in the living room. Everything’s ok” she soothed softly.

After a few minutes the blonde’s breathing started to steady and her tears began to slow. Persey had come over and curled up at her feet, resting her head on the top of Ashlyn’s bare foot.

“Jesus” the keeper exhaled a shaky breath. “Fuck.”

“Bad dream?” Sydney asked, concerned.

“God, the worst” Ashlyn replied and wiped her sweaty palms on her joggers as the color started to return to her cheeks.

“What was it about?” Sydney’s face was soft and full of worry. “They say if you talk about the nightmare you take the power away from it.”

“Ugh” the keeper groaned. “It’s my worst nightmare and it’s so fucking real. It’s the night she was born” she nodded at her baby girl in the coach’s arms. “Fuck.”

Ali’s face frowned in confusion and then creased in worry as she rubbed her hand across her keeper’s strong back to try and help calm her down. She could still feel her wife’s heart racing inside her chest as her hand moved between her shoulder blades.

“I’ve never been more terrified in my entire life than I was that night, or morning, or whatever” she explained in a soft, strained voice. “Never.”

“But you saved us babe” Ali offered sweetly, pressing a kiss into the blonde’s t-shirt covered shoulder. “You got us to the hospital in time and everything turned out just fine. Nothing scary at all.”

“Yeah, nothing scary except your doctor telling you to decide which of you to save if everything went sideways during surgery. Piece of cake” Ashlyn cringed and shook her head as if she was hoping to shake the images from her brain at the same time too.

“What?!” Ali’s jaw dropped and her eyes went wide. “You never told me that. Did that really happen?” she looked at Sydney for confirmation.

“You didn’t know?” the coach asked, surprised. “Usually you guys talk about all of this stuff. I can’t believe it’s been two weeks since that night and you haven’t heard this story yet.”

“Somebody tell me the goddamned story” Ali commanded quietly as she felt her blood pressure rising and her patience dwindling.

“Well, there’s not much to tell” Ashlyn started, disappointed when the brunette pulled her hands back into her own lap. The keeper took another deep breath to try and calm her nerves. “It’s kind of a blur. Like, I don’t remember how I got from the car to the ER with Patty. One minute we were lifting you onto the gurney and then they just whisked you away from me.” She paused and
swallowed hard. “I didn’t know if I would ever see you again...”

“It’s ok honey” Ali reached over and squeezed her keeper’s thigh and then patted it. “I’m here. Everything worked out just fine.”

“God, I was so scared” the keeper closed her eyes as the terrifying memories rippled through her body and mind. “And then Patty was standing in front of me and saying a lot of things I couldn’t hear or understand for some reason. But then she shook me and I could hear her again.”

“What did she say Ashlyn?” Ali’s face fell a little as she saw how distressed her wife was.

The blonde took a good couple of minutes to collect herself. She cleared her throat and leaned forward so her elbows were on her knees. She rubbed her face again and then spoke slowly but clearly.

“She told me to decide which of you to save if something went wrong and she could only save one” she swallowed again and couldn’t believe how dry her mouth was.

“What did you tell her?” Ali was having a hard time keeping the fear out of her own voice as she heard this story for the very first time in fifteen days. “Please tell me you told her to save the baby” the brunette pleaded with her still upset wife. “Please tell me you did the right thing Ash.”

Ashlyn turned her head to look at Ali and saw the anger mixed with fear mixed with judgment on her beautiful face. Did the brunette really mean that she wanted Ashlyn to tell the doctor to save the baby? That’s what the look on her face was...she was upset with Ashlyn’s answer. How the fuck was there a right or a wrong answer to that impossible question?

“Ashlyn, what did you tell her?” the brunett’s voice was insistent.

“I told her to save you.”

There was a split second where Ashlyn thought she had misread the situation and that Ali was happy with her answer. But after that split-second came the judgment and the shock and, worst of all, the disdain Ali had for her wife. It was so complete and strong that there was no way to hide it, not that Ali was interested in trying to hide it.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” she raised both eyebrows up to her hairline and pulled her hand back away from her keeper. “You didn’t tell her to save the baby?!?”

Sydney wished she was anywhere but right there at that moment. She knew there could never be a right answer to that question. Frankly, she couldn’t imagine being asked a worse question. It was literally a question that nightmares were made of and she felt terrible for the keeper but there wasn’t much she could do to help her. She knew her best friend was about to lose her shit and she still wasn’t sure what the hell was really going on with her.

“No, Al, I...I told her to save you” the blonde looked confused as she tried desperately to find some tiny bit of sympathy or empathy or kindness in her wife’s face. Instead, she saw nothing but anger and disgust. That pissed her off immediately. “You’re really going to sit here and tell me that I gave her the wrong fucking answer?”

“Of course I am” Ali’s teeth were gritted as she spoke. “After everything we went through to get pregnant, and everything she had to go through to try and grow and thrive inside me with my fucked up uterus...you were willing to just throw that away?!”

“What?!?” Ashlyn stood up quickly as her blood boiled, making Persey jump up and get out of the
way. She took two steps to get to the other side of the coffee table as she tried to think of what to say next. She knew Ali wasn’t at her best those days and she was trying her hardest to be patient and forgiving. But this was just too much. Too fucking much for her to swallow and choke on. “Don’t you dare...” fresh tears sprang to her eyes and her emotions made her stop talking and gasp for breath before continuing. “That was the single worst moment of my life” she said evenly as she glared at the brunette. “Who are you to judge me? You didn’t even know what was going on. I can’t believe you’re going to twist this around into something else I fucked up or got wrong. You’re unbelievable.” The blonde was pacing now, back and forth along the coffee table as her thoughts pinged around inside her brain. “You don’t get to sit there and judge me Ali. You have no idea what that was like, and I hope to God you never ever have to find out because it was awful. It was terrible. I haven’t had a good night’s sleep since that night and I’m not sure I ever will. I almost lost you both...” hot, angry tears fell down her face as she started to lose focus. “I almost lost both of you” she began to sob in earnest and ran out of the living room towards the front stairs.

Ali clenched her jaw and narrowed her eyes as she sat there in the whirlwind of emotions that Ashlyn had left in her wake. She was about to get up and follow her upstairs so they could finish their fight, but she heard the excited little voices of Drew and Cash as the parade-goers walked up the driveway toward the big old house. She closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths while Sydney sat Josie up and then held her over her shoulder to burp her. There was no time to deal with this right now. They needed to make and eat dinner and then get the kids bathed and ready for fireworks in the backyard in their pjs before their special late bedtime.

“Mommy!” Drew yelled excitedly as he saw Ali from the mudroom.

“Hi sweet boy! How was the parade?” she asked as she deflected his little body from her still recovering lap and onto the couch next to her.

He was hot and sweaty and adorable as he told her all about what he had seen and heard during the past three hours. Sydney turned Josie around and sat her on her lap so she could watch and listen to her big brother as well as Cash once he and Sandi joined them on the couch. Deb and Dom went into the kitchen and Whitney stood in the living room for a minute, looking from Sydney to Ali and back again. She knew something was wrong and she could tell by the look on Ali’s face that Ashlyn was either already very upset or about to be very upset.

“Whit” Sydney called her name from her spot on the couch. “Can you take her up and change her for me? I have to pee.”

“I’d love to take the strongest little girl I know” Whitney cooed and grinned as she lifted Josie up and nuzzled her against her chest. “Is Ash upstairs too?”

“Yep” Sydney replied with a grunt as she hefted her 5-months pregnant body up off the couch and kissed her son on the top of his head. She locked eyes with the defender. “You just missed her.”
What a great win for Orlando tonight! It wasn't pretty but they hung tough and came through in the end instead of being the team to let the game slip away in the waning minutes. Hopefully this will galvanize the team and they can use it to put some wins together and earn some points.

As you can tell from the chapter title, this one's kind of a downer. But don't give up on them yet. Our girls are in one of the toughest spots they've ever been in but I sure wouldn't bet against them.

The fight had no easy reconciliation. There was no sweet or heartfelt apology from one wife to the other. There was no resolution. There was only anger and disappointment and lots of hurt feelings on both sides. Whitney had talked with Ashlyn about it as soon as she changed Josie’s diaper and found her best friend up in her studio. Sydney had tried to talk to Ali about it but the brunette had retreated into her own bunker of denial and indignation and nobody was getting in until Ali was good and damned well ready for it. The next week went by with the same sleeping and baby feeding routine as the previous week. The only difference was that instead of Ali and Ashlyn not spending time together or connecting with each other because of their opposite schedules and sleeping patterns, they simply avoided each other as much as possible. Ashlyn slept in the twin bed in the nursery even when Josie wasn’t next to her in the crib. There were no goodbye kisses in the morning or goodnight kisses before Ali went to sleep, alone in their big bed. Four days went by like that and neither of them made any attempt to talk to the other. They were both pissed off. They didn’t ignore each other completely. They weren’t bratty ten year olds. They were polite with each other when they spoke in front of Drew or Deb but just barely.

Deb had picked up on the tension that night as they gathered in the backyard for the fireworks. Ashlyn was already lying on the big blanket with Josie, just waiting for Ali to come down after giving Drew his bath. Dom had helped and they had bathed both boys together and gotten them changed and ready for bed. The keeper, always the first one to soften during a spat, thought they would be able to share their favorite thing together, fireworks, and start to heal the rift that had opened up earlier that afternoon. She was stunned and hurt when her wife sat down next to Sydney in one of the lounge chairs instead of following Drew over to sit with them on their blanket. Ashlyn had to fight to hold her tears in. Whitney took Ali’s spot on the blanket and Deb observed the whole thing with surprise and sadness.

As she hugged Sydney goodbye after the fireworks she whispered over her shoulder into her ear.

“How bad is it?”

“It’s bad Mama D” Sydney whispered back. “There’s no right or wrong this time. But you know our girl...”

“She can’t be wrong right now. She just doesn’t have it in her” Deb said as she and Sydney exchanged sad, worried looks and pulled apart.

Thursday that week was Ali’s three-week postpartum appointment and Dr. Comello’s primary concern was her c-section incision and her uterine repair. Ashlyn came right from training and met
her wife in the waiting room, quietly taking a seat next to her in the room full of people. Ali glanced up at her and then brought her eyes back down to her phone without saying anything. There was the slightest nod of her head, acknowledging the keeper’s presence but nothing more. Ashlyn sighed heavily as she took her seat and waited.

“You’ve done a great job taking care of your incision Ali” Dr. Comello smiled up at the brunette before looking at the blonde standing farther away from the examination table than usual. The doctor couldn’t remember a time when they had been in an exam room like this without at least holding hands. “I know it’s hard not to pick her up but it looks like you’ve been good about that too.”

The friendly doctor completed the pelvic and breast exam and made some notes on her tablet as she finished asking her patient questions. She could feel the tension between the couple and noted their body language and behavior was unlike anything she had ever witnessed before. Neither woman seemed very happy or healthy and the doctor knew it wasn’t all from lack of sleep.

“And your breasts have gone back to normal now, no residual tenderness or anything?”

“No. My milk dried up about a week after I got home. And this week everything feels back to normal” Ali replied plainly.

“So no engorgement or mastitis or anything?” Patty finished kneading the brunette’s breasts and pulled her hospital gown back up over her shoulder for her.

“No” Ali shook her head. “It was just really uncomfortable for about a week. I used the cabbage leaves, my mom swears by them” she rolled her eyes and smiled softly. “I felt like an idiot but they really helped.”

“Hey, sometimes the old wives’ remedies work better than some of the modern medicine” Patty chuckled.

Ashlyn hadn’t said a word and felt her heart sink when she heard her wife talk about putting cold cabbage leaves on her breasts for an entire week. The keeper hadn’t even known about it. She sighed louder than she meant to and the doctor glanced at her as she made more notes.

“Everything else ok?” she asked cautiously, not looking at either woman. “Josephine still doing well? And Drew liking the big brother gig?”

Ali started to get dressed so Patty turned her attention to Ashlyn and waited for an answer.

“Um, yeah, she’s doing great. She’s a lot fussier than Drew was but she’s been through a whole lot more too, so it makes sense I guess.”

“That’s a good way to look at it” the doctor smiled at the blonde. “They say every pregnancy is different and every delivery and every baby and you guys have a perfect example of that.”

“Drew’s doing a pretty good job too” the keeper continued when Patty looked at her expectantly. “He’s not always in the mood to be a big brother but for the most part he’s been really good about it. We’re so lucky Ali’s mom is here with us for the summer. She’s a real lifesaver.” Ashlyn couldn’t help but smile, even just the small one that lifted the corners of her mouth.

“Well that’s excellent” Dr. Comello said definitively as she looked back towards her patient who had just finished putting her clothes back on. “Ali, you’re doing great. You can officially pick your baby up, but not Drew yet. Nothing more than twenty pounds until I see you again for your six-week postpartum check-up, ok?”
“Thanks Patty” Ali smiled with relief and glanced quickly at her wife who was also wearing a small smile.

“But don’t go crazy” the doctor warned with a stern look. “Not too many stairs, not too many chores. Just pick Josie up for the next couple of weeks and start with that. Don’t overdo it. And keep up the good work with your incision – no baths yet. I don’t want to see any infection there to mess up all my stitches. And you don’t want your scar to be any bigger than it has to be, right?”

“Right” Ali agreed with a slightly frustrated sigh.

“So the only thing that’s different is that she can pick the baby up now, right?” Ashlyn asked, wanting to be sure she understood the rules.

“Exactly” Patty answered but couldn’t help seeing the exasperated eye-roll from the brunette when she heard her wife’s question. She then watched Ashlyn’s jaw and fists clench in response. “Ok guys, what’s going on?”

They both looked at the doctor with surprise. Ali looked indignant. It was her go to attitude when she was embarrassed or if she felt exposed. Ashlyn, at least, had the decency to blush a little as she dropped her eyes to the floor.

“Come on” the doctor urged softly. “Somebody talk to me. What’s happening with you guys? You’re never going to win any acting awards, by the way” she chuckled in an attempt to lighten the mood.

There was an agonizing thirty seconds of silence before Ashlyn finally spoke, her voice quiet and flat.

“She’s mad at me because I told you to save her instead of the baby that night...” her words drifted off as she returned her gaze to the floor, blushing even more.

“Ashlyn!” the brunette chastised sharply and shot a glare at her from the other side of the examination table.

“Ohio, I see” Patty nodded her head slowly and blew a breath out as she put both her hands on her own thighs before continuing. “Well, that’s the worst question I ever have to ask any expectant partner. The absolute worst.” She paused for a minute, hoping somebody would say something else so she could get a better gauge on what she could do to help. “I feel like I need to point out to you both, that it didn’t come to that. We never had to get to that drastic point, thank God.”

“I should never have said anything” Ashlyn shook her headSadly.

“Yeah, maybe that would have been a good idea” Ali snapped, picking up her purse and leaving the office in a huff.

Both Patty and Ashlyn were surprised at her abrupt departure and looked at each other in stunned silence for a few seconds.

“Sorry doc” she apologized as she turned to leave. “I’ll make sure we’ve got the next appointment set up, don’t worry.”

“Ash, listen” Dr. Comello began and waited for the blonde to look her way again. “She’s got a lot going on, try to remember that...”

“I know” Ashlyn interrupted. “For what it’s worth, I’d answer your question the same way again,
every time. I just have to wait for her to forgive me” she swallowed. “I hope it doesn’t take too long.”

That night Ashlyn put Drew to bed after watching some of their shark week shows together on the DVR. She sat next to him as she tucked him in and kissed him goodnight.

“Sleep well shark boy, I love you.”

“Love you too mama” he said, managing each word carefully as he was still learning to use pronouns.

The ‘you’, used correctly, was relatively new and Ashlyn smiled broadly when she heard his sentence. The tired toddler beamed back at her and she was struck again by how much he looked like her beautiful brunette. Her heart ached. It took her a minute, but she regained her composure and made sure his nightlight and sound machine were both on before closing the door behind her. She started to head down the front stairs but stopped and looked out the front window for a minute instead. It was almost completely dark out at 8:00pm. What the fuck were they doing? How had everything gotten so messed up? And, more importantly, how had they both let it stay messed up for so fucking long? It had been a full week and they hadn’t even tried to talk through it. When had that become who they were or how they handled problems? All Ashlyn wanted at that moment was to hold her wife and tell her that she loved her. She didn’t even really care if Ali said it back. The keeper knew she couldn’t go on like this much longer. It was too hard on her heart. She was angry that Ali couldn’t, or didn’t want to, understand how horrible that night in the Emergency Room had been for her. But she wasn’t willing to let that ruin her marriage. She moved quickly down the hall towards the master bedroom, she didn’t want to chicken out. Ashlyn put her hand on the door knob and found herself hesitating and then softly knocking on the door to her own goddamned bedroom. She spoke quietly.

“Al, it’s me. Can I come in?”

She waited a minute and knocked again, this time opening the door when she still didn’t hear a reply. Ashlyn walked through the narrow entranceway to the room and saw her wife lying on her side in bed, already asleep. It was early, even for Ali and their fucked up schedule, and Ashlyn felt her heart drop.

“Are you asleep?” she whispered, not wanting to let her moment of courage go to waste without really trying.

She stood there at the foot of the bed, wanting desperately to wake her wife up. She thought of all the times during the past two years when she had done just that – woken Ali up. The brunette had encouraged her and they had both agreed that it was an important part of maintaining the connection that was so vital to them both. It hadn’t always been about sex either. Sometimes Ashlyn woke her up so they could finish a conversation they had started earlier in the day before Drew and life had gotten in the way. The keeper sighed sadly as she stood there. What she wouldn’t give to be able to talk with Ali right now.

“Baby?” she tried one last time.

But there was no movement from the bed, not even the light snoring or deep breathing she could usually hear when Ali was asleep. That made a whole other thought pop into her aching head. What if Ali was just pretending to be asleep so she didn’t have to talk to her? The keeper felt her anger spike as she realized that was a very real possibility. That was absolutely something Ali would do to avoid talking to her. Not the Ali she had known and loved for so long, but the wounded and bitter woman in the bed in front of her now. That Ali would pretend to be asleep and it broke Ashlyn’s
They made their way through the next day and managed to celebrate Deb’s birthday with a small ice cream cake and some gifts. The party was more for Drew than anybody else and Deb let him help her blow the candles out. They were originally going to have Sydney, Cash and Sandi come over for birthday dinner and cake too but Deb had told Sydney how bad things were at the house and suggested it wouldn’t be a great idea. Ashlyn had told Whitney the same thing when she had seen her for lunch earlier that day instead. The keeper had already talked to her best friend three different times that week about her fight with Ali. Both women were completely stumped as to what to do. Whitney made sure Ashlyn knew she was behind her 100% and even invited her to come stay with her in Cambridge for a couple of days if she wanted or needed to. Ashlyn knew that wouldn’t help anything but she appreciated the offer and the support. That night after the party, Ali took Drew upstairs, without carrying him, and gave him his bath and put him to bed. She never came back downstairs.

“Thank you for tonight” Deb smiled as she walked into the living room to say goodnight to the blonde. She found Ashlyn sitting in the recliner watching shark week and feeding Josie her 10pm bottle. “You’re very sweet and I love you Ashlyn.”

“Aww, thanks Deb” the keeper smiled sheepishly up at her mother-in-law as she bent down to hug her. “I’m sorry...there weren’t more people here to share it with you. Whitney really wanted to come but...”

She couldn’t even get the words to come out of her mouth. ‘Whitney really wanted to come but your daughter and I are so fucked up right now that none of our friends want anything to do with us and I can’t fucking blame them’ was what almost escaped her lips but she stopped herself just in time.

“Hey, it’s ok” Deb said softly with another smile. “All my favorite people were here, that’s all that matters.”

Something about the kindness and sincerity in Deb’s voice made Ashlyn start to cry. Ali used to talk to her like that. It wasn’t a desperate sob, but a slow, sad cry with tears that rolled down her cheeks and onto Josie’s pajamas.

“God, I’m sorry” she groaned quietly and turned her head to the side, towards Deb and away from the baby, so she wouldn’t get her daughter wet.

“Ashlyn, honey, it’s ok” Deb soothed as she put her hand on top of her blonde head and kept it there for a minute. “Whatever is going on with you two, well, you’ll work it out. I know you will. You just keep believing it too.”

“But...but what if she doesn’t want it to?” the keeper’s voice was very small and very afraid. She closed her eyes because she couldn’t bear to see the pity on Deb’s face.

“She does. I promise you she does. She may not even know that right now, but she’ll figure it out.”

“She won’t even talk to me. Is she ok? We went to the doctor yesterday and it was the first time I even heard about the damned cabbage leaves. What else am I missing?”

Ashlyn sounded so sad and pathetic and sweet that Deb’s heart broke for her. She loved her daughter beyond measure and would always be in her corner, no matter what. But she loved this daughter too and she knew Ashlyn’s world was upside down right now and there was nothing she could do to help her.
“She’s doing fine Ash” Deb moved her hand down to cup the blonde’s face. “She’s confused about a lot of things and I think she just needs some time to sort it all out. I know it’s a lot to ask, but if you can try and be patient...”

“I am, I’m being as patient as I can” the keeper replied earnestly, eyes pleading up to the older woman. “I don’t know what else to do but be patient.” She paused for a minute and looked down. “We’ve never ever had a fight like this before. I...I’m scared Deb.”

“I think she is too, honey. But listen, I’m going to try and talk to her about it tomorrow while you’re all at the game. I don’t know how far I’ll get” she chuckled, knowing her stubborn daughter wasn’t going to welcome her intrusion. “But I’m going to try. You just be strong and keep taking care of yourself and these beautiful children and it’ll be ok. You’ll see.”

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A lot had changed that year with the NWSL and the Lifetime TV game of the week. Ashlyn Harris was still one of the biggest draws in the league, including USWNT members, but she only started every other game for her team. It was odd to see her beautiful face in the introduction for the show each week and then not see her take the field for a Breakers game. Her sponsorships had only gotten stronger after her excellent work during the Olympics and with the Breakers nearly perfect season last year. But this year the fans were missing her. And she had been missing from a lot of the team’s camera coverage and social media for the past three weeks as she dealt with her family situation. She had posted a cute picture of Drew and baby Josie on all of her social media the week they came home from the hospital but not very much since. Lifetime TV wanted to interview her on the pregame show for that Saturday’s game when Boston hosted Seattle for the game of the week. Ashlyn would have loved to talk to her agent about it, but since Ali wasn’t speaking to her at the time she talked to Whitney instead. They agreed it was a good idea and came up with some guidelines for what to talk about and what not to talk about and things like that.

“So tell me what’s going on with The Breakers this season Ashlyn?” Heather O’Reilly asked from their spot in the front row of stadium seats where the camera crew had set up a few hours before the game. “This is not the dominant team we’re used to seeing. Is there still time to save this season?”

“We think there is” the keeper replied with a confident smile. “We’ve got eleven games left, including today, and our plan is to win as many of those as we can and make the playoffs. That’s where we’re at right now and I know we can do it.”

“You’ve had some retirements and some injuries and some player turnover from last season to this season. Is that what we’re seeing or has there been a system change as well?”

“That’s a great question Heather” the keeper smiled warmly at her old friend. “As you know, and most of our fans do too, I love that about our league” Ashlyn went on a tangent for a minute to praise the die-hard fans, “our fans are so intelligent and they love the game so much. It’s just great to be able to play for them and in front of them. Sorry. I just had to get that out because I don’t think a lot of coaches bother to talk to the fans about the x’s and o’s. I’m not pointing fingers or anything. I just think, in general, the coaches gloss over the finer points and I think our fans would actually appreciate a lot of those finer points.”

“I’m with you, for sure” Heather agreed with a smile.

“Like I was saying, our fans know that sometimes personnel dictates the system a little bit and sometimes it’s the opposite” Ashlyn explained. It was easy to see her love for and knowledge of the game at times like these. “Sometimes you have players trying to step into a different role within the same system to go along with the other new players. There are a lot of moving parts to any team and,
for whatever reason, we haven’t been able to get our parts all working together yet this year. But, like I said, we’ve still got time and we’ll get it worked out.”

“And what about you personally, you’re not the de facto starter anymore. How are you handling that?”

“Well, it’s an adjustment, for sure” she smiled but she was unable to keep the disappointment from her face. “But we all feel the same way about this team. Every one of us will do whatever is best for the team and that’s why we’ve been so successful over the last few years.”

Ashlyn smiled again and hoped Heather would let it go at that. But part of what made her such a good broadcaster and commentator was that she didn’t avoid the hard questions, even when she was interviewing a friend.

“Do you feel the team is better without you as the starting keeper?”

“Geez Heather” she grinned and shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “What are you trying to do to me?” she exhaled and looked down for a few seconds.

“I’ve got to ask,” the interviewer grinned back. “It’s what every women’s soccer fan wants to know.”

“I’ve never been a very good liar” Ashlyn paused one last time before being honest as ever. “So no, I don’t think we’re better without me in goal. Look” she continued quickly before Heather could ask her another question. “I’m all over the record talking about what an excellent keeper I think Abby is, and that hasn’t changed at all. But to be successful at this level you have to have an absolute, complete belief in your own supremacy. You have to believe in every fiber of your being that you are the best and that you are going to go out on that pitch and be the very best. I’m no different. I believe I’m the best and whether I start every game or every other game isn’t going to shake that belief one bit. When I feel like I’m not the best, I’ll hang up my boots.”

“Well said, thank you for addressing that. I’m sorry to put you on the spot like that” Heather acknowledged with a nod of her head. “Now, I understand congratulations are in order” she smiled brightly at Ashlyn.

“Oh yeah, thank you very much” the keeper’s face exploded into a dimpled grin and her eyes danced with joy as soon as Heather brought up her family.

“You and your wife just had another baby, a little girl this time, is that right?”

“Yes. But my wife did all the work again” she clarified. “Our daughter is three weeks old today. We’re very lucky and very happy.”

“Do we have it?” Heather asked someone off-camera. “Yes, here we go, look at that cute picture everybody. What a beautiful family.”

Heather and Ashlyn looked into the nearby monitor to see what was being broadcast live across Lifetime TV at that moment. It was a picture Sydney had taken of the four of them the morning of the Horribles parade and Ali and Ashlyn were sitting next to each other on the living room couch. Ashlyn had a grinning Drew on her lap, dressed in his red, white and blue 4th of July shirt, while Ali held Josie in her arms. You could just see the top half of her face and some of her orange hair from her comfortable spot, wrapped in a baby blanket. Even Persey and Fred were in the picture. Persey was next to Ashlyn on the couch with Drew’s hand resting adorably on her head and Fred was sitting on the floor between their legs smiling at the camera like he was a professional dog model. Ashlyn was looking down at Josie with the most beautiful look on her face. And Ali was smiling her
nose-crinkling grin at Drew and whatever cute thing he had just done or said.

As she sat there looking at the picture, Ashlyn’s heart leapt into her throat and she was sure she was going to cry. That had been the last time she and Ali had been normal with each other. Later that afternoon they had ruined everything with the fight. The blonde wondered if they could ever be that happy again. Lord did she miss her wife.

“Aw, look at you getting all choked up” Heather teased, gently.

“Yeah” Ashlyn cleared her throat and fought back the tears that were threatening to spill. “You got me. I can’t believe how lucky I am.” She reached up and wiped a tear away just as it fell. “And my wife is amazing. Seriously people, I don’t care how old you are or what holiday we just had, call your mom and thank her for bringing you into this world. I’ll never get over it as long as I live” she admitted with a shy grin and a shake of her head.

Back at the big old house, Ali, Deb and Sydney were watching the pre-game show and saw Ashlyn’s heartfelt interview from the comfort of the living room couch. They were having a relaxing afternoon at home with Josie while Ken and Vicki took Drew to the Breakers game with Dom, Sandi and Cash. Whitney and Ryan and Niki and Noah were meeting them there in the Knight-Harris suite as well.

“That’s a great picture” Deb said as she looked at the tv. “Why don’t I have that picture?” she gave her daughter a playful look and quirked her eyebrow.

Ali didn’t respond. She just sat there watching the tv and chewing on her bottom lip.

“I took it” Sydney offered, reaching for her phone. “I gave it to Whitney before they left for the parade that day” she smiled at the memory. “She must have given it to Heather to use. I’ll send it to you right now.”

“Perfect” Deb said cheerfully and stood up. “It’s almost 4pm, I’ll go get our little princess up.”

“Thanks mom” Ali said softly as she watched her mother move towards the front stairs.

“How’re you doing Alibaba?” Sydney asked quietly and patted her best friend’s leg. “You look pretty sad over there. You ready to get this thing figured out with you and your sweet wife?”

Ali took a deep breath and let it out slowly, eyes looking straight ahead at the commercials on the tv.

“There’s nothing to figure out Syd.” Her voice was flat and sad. “I just have to decide if I can live with what she did or not.”

“What does that mean?” Sydney’s eyes were wide as she stared at the brunette on the other end of the couch.

“I don’t think I can trust her anymore, not with the kids anyway…”

“What?!”

“She obviously doesn’t value their lives as much as I think she should. And I’m not sure I can live with that.”

“Hold on now, you’re not making any sense. Ashlyn loves those kids more than life itself and you know it. What’s gotten in to you?”
“If that were true then she would have told Patty to save the baby, not me” Ali explained tearfully. She was clearly very upset not only about Ashlyn’s choice, but also about her own reaction to it. “I can’t make that go away. I can’t pretend I don’t know that was her decision.” She bit her bottom lip hard to try and keep from crying. “I don’t want to feel this way about it, but I do.”

“So you’re ending it? That’s the answer after a week of suffering and stubbornness?” Sydney was angry, and for the very first time, she was angry on Ashlyn’s behalf. “Have you even talked to her about it Al?”

“What’s there to talk about? You haven’t even talked to her yet to know what she was thinking or feeling about any of it.” The coach was trying not to explode at her best friend but it was becoming more difficult with each passing minute. Her voice was raised and her nostrils were flaring as she gave the brunette a stern look. “I can’t believe this is how you’re handling this.”

“I can’t believe you’re taking her side. What would you do if it was Dom and he had to answer the same question. Knock on wood” she leaned forward and knocked on the coffee table.

“God forbid, but I would thank him for being strong enough to make a decision in the first place. And then I would hug him so hard he’d practically choke when it turned out both the baby and I were ok.” She took a big breath after delivering her answer with a lot of passion and emotion. “You’re punishing her for something that didn’t even happen! Do you get that?”

Ali narrowed her eyes at the coach and shook her head from side to side in silent frustration. “Is this another case of you worrying something into existence? Is this you doing that again Al? We’ve talked about this before and you promised me you’d stop looking for trouble where there wasn’t any. Remember your Jill & Jill party? You promised me you’d stop giving away your happiness.”

The brunette rested her head back against the couch and closed her eyes. She did indeed remember Sydney pointing out something she had done her entire life as they sat near the bar in the middle of the huge room almost exactly four years ago. Fuck. Was that what she was doing? Fuck. It was so hard to think anything through logically with her hormones all over the place.

Deb came in carrying Josie and a bottle and offered her to Ali who gladly took her. The newborn and her big brother were still the only things that could make her heart feel good those days.

“Hi little one” she cooed and kissed her daughter’s forehead as she flailed her little arms around, anticipating her bottle. “Did you have a good sleep? We’re watching mama’s game, you’re just in time” she explained as she positioned the baby in her arm and brought the bottle to her lips. “The only thing is mama’s not actually playing in this game because, well, the coach is crazy. But that’s a conversation for another day.”

The brunette watched adoringly as her daughter sucked on her bottle and made tiny gurgling and sighing sounds as she ate. She couldn’t help but think of Sydney’s words again. They were both ok. They had both made it and Ashlyn’s decision had no bearing on anything, really. Was she making a huge deal of something that she shouldn’t even care about? They were all quiet for a few minutes as Deb rejoined them, putting fresh drinks down for each of them.

“But what if I would have answered the question differently?” Ali finally asked, seemingly out of the blue after some time had passed.
“What?” Deb gave her daughter a confused look.

“What if the doctor asked me who to save and I...I would have said the baby?” Ali’s voice was small and fearful again as she continued to work through what she and Sydney had talked about.

Deb looked from her daughter to Sydney and back.

“Do you girls want me to leave? I can go get dinner started...”

“No Mama D” Sydney answered quickly. “We were talking about what’s going on with Miss thing here and her wife.”

“Oh” Deb’s eyes went wide. “I’m glad you brought it up. I promised myself I would talk to you about that today Alex but I really wasn’t looking forward to it” she sighed sadly and looked apologetically at her daughter.

Sydney brought her up to speed and they all sat there quietly, thinking about Ali’s previous question.

“Well, all I know is that nobody should ever have to be in that position. I don’t think what your answer is even matters. It’s like ‘Sophie’s Choice’. Oh my God I bawled my eyes out when I watched that movie” Deb admitted with a small gasp.

Sydney looked confused.

“It’s a movie where Meryl Streep’s character and her two young children arrive at a concentration camp. The Nazis tell her she can only keep one child with her in the camp and the other one will be taken from her and killed. They make her decide which of her children to save” Ali explained quietly.

“Damn” the coach’s eyes went wide.

“What your doctor asked Ashlyn to do wasn’t much easier” Deb continued. “I can’t think of a crueler thing to do to somebody. I have no idea what I would have said if I had been in Ashlyn’s shoes. Poor thing,” Deb paused and exhaled. “You should have seen her at the hospital Alex, she was a wreck.”

“She was in her pajamas” Sydney said softly, remembering the wee hours of that morning three weeks ago and shivering at the memory. “And they were covered in your blood. And...I swear...” but she couldn’t go on. “I’m sorry” she said quickly and looked away for a minute to compose herself. “And then, when the other doctor came out to tell us they were rushing Josie to the NICU and that you were still in surgery and that there had been a complication...” she rolled her eyes dramatically and wiped another tear away from her face. “She stood there for a minute like she was physically trying to find a way to split her body into two halves so she could be in both places at the same time.”

“I had no idea...” Ali said slowly, the wheels turning in her head. “I never thought about it like that before.”

“Well that’s why you need to talk to your wife Alex” Deb urged, a little stronger than she meant to.

“I’ve tried mom” she replied with a little heat. “I asked her about it a bunch of times when we were still in the hospital but she wouldn’t talk about it.”

“Well, maybe you two can find some time now. Or maybe you need to go see the therapist together...” Deb tried again, softer this time.
“All I’m saying boo, is that you should try not to judge her too harshly until you understand more about what it was like for her” Sydney kept her voice low and even, not wanting to piss off her best friend when it felt like they might be making progress. “And, for the record, I think she made the right call.”
Breakdown in the Driveway

Chapter Notes

Not sure if this needs a warning or not. Ashlyn finally breaks.

“Where’s Ashlyn?” Ali asked her father as he carried an exhausted Drew into the big old house and up the stairs to his bedroom.

“She’s staying with Whitney tonight” he carefully settled his grandson on the twin bed without waking him up. He glanced at his daughter who was standing in the doorway watching him, chewing her bottom lip. “Where are his pajamas?”

“Oh, right” the brunette moved quickly and quietly to the dresser and brought a pair of pajamas back to the twin bed. “Thanks for taking him today” she spoke softly to her father as they worked together to get the toddler changed and into his big boy shark bed.

“My pleasure. We had a lot of fun” he replied with a broad smile, keeping his voice low. “Ash and Niki and Dom had the boys out there running around after the game. It was pretty cute. He’s wiped out, obviously.”

When Ali got into bed after Josie’s 10pm feeding, she set her alarm for 1am and sighed heavily. She had been feeling sorry for the way she had treated her wife over the past week, and was looking forward to having her home that night so they could talk, or at least talk about talking. Instead, Ashlyn chose not to come home at all. And she hadn’t even called or texted the brunette to let her know. Whitney sent a text just before 11pm telling Ali she was taking the keeper home for the night and not to worry. Ali wasn’t worried, she was mad. She was mad at herself for being a stubborn bitch for an entire week. She was mad at Dr. Comello for asking Ashlyn to make such an impossible decision. She was mad at Ashlyn for telling her about it in the first place. She was mad at her mother for butting in. She was mad at Sydney for knowing her so well and calling her on her weird penchant for making trouble when there might not really be any to begin with. God that was annoying. And she was mad at Ashlyn for not coming home and not calling or texting. The brunette knew she needed to get some sleep but that pressure to sleep was stressing her out and making it impossible for her brain to shut off. She had been thinking non-stop about everything she and Sydney and her mom had discussed that afternoon and her head was killing her.

Ali had decided two things so far. First, she needed to talk to her wife and stop behaving like such a spoiled brat. Second, she needed to make an appointment with Mattie whether Ashlyn wanted to join her or not. The brunette wasn’t feeling like herself and it was more than the sleep deprivation. The baby coming early had freaked her out a little bit. Josie spending three days in the NICU had been stressful. And then not being able to breastfeed had completely fucked her up. That was the biggest thing, she thought. The three-week break in the NWSL schedule could not come soon enough. Hopefully, she and Ashlyn could make some time to try and get back on track. After almost a half hour of imagining how they could make that happen, she finally drifted into a fitful sleep.

The rest of the world kept on spinning, even though Ali and Ashlyn were stuck in their own purgatory. Kyle and Nathan had been planning their wedding all year long and it was fast
approaching. They wanted to have their wedding and go on a two-week honeymoon before the end of August so Kyle could be back at home in NYC ready for his second year of film school starting in September. They weren’t going to do a lot of the traditional wedding things. What they wanted was to stand up in front of their friends and family and declare their love for each other. And then they wanted a big party with lots of dancing and some cake afterwards. They weren’t even going to do best men or women. Just the two of them with no other distractions. Kyle really wanted to have the wedding near Boston. He still felt a little guilty that he had pulled Nathan down to NYC and wanted to make it up to him, or his parents at least, and have the wedding closer to home. The two men had researched dozens of big event resorts and hotels in the New England area and finally agreed on the fancy resort hotel on Cape Cod, in Chatham, MA, where Ali had taken Ashlyn for her birthday when she was pregnant with Drew. Ali had mentioned it to them when they were putting their list together but never really thought much more about it. She was surprised when they actually selected it as their wedding location.

“It’s perfect for us” Kyle explained to his sister over the phone back in February when they had made their final decision. “It’s huge and there are lots of different types of rooms or even cottages you can stay in, depending on what you want to do. There are a bunch of activities and the food is amazing.”

“You don’t have to convince me” she chuckled. “I’m the one who found it and told you it should be on your list, remember?”

“I know, but I feel kind of bad about stealing it from you.”

“You’re not stealing it from me you goof” she playfully chastised her brother. “I’m glad you guys love it. I think it’s going to be a great wedding, party, celebration, whatever you end up calling it” she giggled. “I can’t wait for August 14th.”

Sydney and Dom were doing better than ever. They had recovered from their sad miscarriage last summer and started trying to have another baby right after the new year. They were successful and the coach was pregnant by the end of February, due to deliver in November. They had taken sort of a zen-like approach to it and it really helped with their overall stress level, not just about the baby, but life in general. Cash was growing like a weed and they had never been happier. Ashlyn and Ali had slowly but surely introduced Dom to every professional athlete they knew. Knight-Harris hired him to come in and talk with some of their clients about keeping their bodies healthy and happy and he always did a great job. Eventually he got the call he had hoped for and went to interview for a full-time job as one of the NE Revolution’s team of physical therapists and trainers. He started in February to help get the Revs players ready for their 2021 season. It was a great job and he loved it. The pay was great, much more than he had been making at the hospital, and he was one of eight different PTs and trainers. His schedule could be crazy at times, but it didn’t necessarily have to be. They rotated shifts so there were three of them in-house at the stadium or with the team on the road at all times. Then there were three more who were available and on-call. Then there were two who were off duty. They could switch up anytime they could get someone to agree to it.

The new position was just the boost the young Dwyer family needed and it allowed them to buy a new, bigger house. Ali’s little house in Stoneham just wasn’t going to accommodate their growing family anymore. They were sad to leave it but there was no doubt it was time. They ended up buying a house in Lynnfield, the same town that the daycare was in, and it was a big old colonial just like the houses Sydney and Ali had grown up in up in Ipswich. It was closer to the big old house in Gloucester by about fifteen minutes and it cut off ten minutes of Sydney’s commute time to her school. Dom’s commute got 20 minutes longer as they moved farther away from the cities of Boston and Cambridge. Their move-in date was at the end of July and that gave them about four months to get all settled before their new baby arrived. It was a very exciting time for the Dwyers.
Whitney and Ryan toyed with the idea of buying Ali’s old house in Stoneham but they just couldn’t swing it yet. Ryan wasn’t making much money as assistant coach of the Boston Cannons and Whitney was a full-time student. If her parents hadn’t helped her with law school she wasn’t sure she could have made it work at all. They would need to keep renting or maybe buy a small condo for the next couple of years as the defender got her degree and then got a job that helped them pay the bills and her student loans. Ashlyn and Whitney had managed to stay in very close touch as she kicked ass through her first semester as a student again. When it started in January Whitney had been nervous as hell, but by the time May rolled around she was feeling confident and happy with her decision. There wasn’t a day that went by, especially in the summer months when her course load was lighter and she had more time to think about it, that she didn’t miss playing professional soccer. She didn’t miss the workouts or the grueling trainings or the sometimes less than ideal accommodations and travel. But she sure did miss the friends she had made over the years. It was a hard, lonely transition to go from being surrounded by 22 like-minded women who were your teammates and family, to being a fairly solitary student who worked and studied alone most of the time. She and Ashlyn had chosen Friday nights as their get-together nights and they aimed for two a month to start with. Ryan was often gone on Friday nights, travelling to an away game with his team, so it worked out great on the weeks when Ashlyn had a home game. So far, so good.

The Harris clan down in Florida were all doing well too. Tammye and Carol were more in love every day and Ashlyn wondered how long it would be before they got married themselves. Chris and Beth were busy with their two businesses and their two children but somehow still making it work. Having Mike, Tammye and Carol around a lot was a big help. Beth’s parents would help if they asked them but neither Chris nor Beth really liked asking them. So they didn’t, unless they were in a real bind. Mike stayed sober and spent more time with his grandkids than he ever had his own children when they were young. Lizzy turned one year old at the end of January and Johnny would be turning four at the end of July. The point was not lost on him and he had a talk with Chris about it one day at the surf shop. They cleared the air about it and the sometimes tense conversation ended with the two men in a tight hug.

Ken and Vicki Krieger continued to be there to help with Drew whenever Ali and Ashlyn needed them. Thankfully, it wasn’t that often. They were their go to for dog care as well and Ken and Vicki finally asked Ali and Ashlyn to watch Bandit for them for a week in February while they went on a long overdue vacation. It felt good to return the favor, both women agreed. Koty was still on the straight and narrow and doing well at Tufts University. He would finish up the Fall semester that year and then graduate in January next year, 2022. He had a new girlfriend that he met at school and seemed to be doing very well. The entire family was happy that he had turned his life around. They were nervous, but happy. And Tanner had taken everything he had learned from Ali last year and transformed his game on the pitch. Before the end of last season, he had made it into the starting lineup as a defensive midfielder and continued to elevate his game. He was getting ready to start his junior year down at Providence College this September and was hoping for even more success on the pitch and at school in general.

Deb and Mike Christopher kept going strong too. Mike’s kids were in college and ready to go live their own lives. That meant that they didn’t necessarily have to stay in Miami if they wanted to live someplace else. Like, say, the northern suburbs of Boston. Nothing had been decided but Deb admitted to her daughter that they had been discussing the possibility of moving up North. Neither of them really wanted to spend the winters in New England. But Deb found it more and more difficult to be away from her grandson. And with a granddaughter on the way, well, it wasn’t getting any easier on her heart. All options were on the table and both Deb and Mike were excited about the possibilities in the next chapter of their lives.

Niki and Molly were doing well with their two boys and successful careers. Their small house in Arlington was feeling smaller all the time but they weren’t going to move. They had both come from
bigger families and had grown up with brothers and sisters all piled together in one small house. It felt right to them and they loved it. They were toying with the idea of having another baby. They both really wanted to have a little girl that they could raise to be a strong woman like so many of their friends and family. But their youngest, Evan, had just turned one in April and Noah would be turning six this coming December and the Crosses were busy with their bustling life as it was. It had been Molly’s idea to start up their Date Night group and all three couples were thrilled with it. As hard as they tried and as much as they promised to make time for each other and date nights with their husbands and wives, it was still difficult to make happen. Niki and Molly, Ali and Ashlyn, and Sydney and Dom were the Date Night group. Once a month they brought their kids to one of their houses and left them there with the one couple while the other two couples went out for dinner and a movie or went back to their own house and had sex or whatever. There weren’t that many rules. You couldn’t cancel on date night unless you were literally at death’s door. Everybody honored that rule because they knew how important date night was for all of them. Even if you didn’t feel like going or if you were aggravated with your spouse, you still went because you didn’t want to let the other two couples down. If there were extenuating circumstances, like, for example, if you had a newborn baby wreaking havoc on your schedule, you could take some time off from date night. But not too long or the group would come for you and do their own version of an intervention to get you back with the program. They had been doing it since January that year – Molly had come up with the idea after their annual ‘bring the kids to see Santa at the Mall’ outing and they had all jumped on board right away. It had gone really well up until June when Ali had Josie two weeks early. The Dwyers and the Crosses would carry on without the Kriegers for June and July and then they would try to get them back in the group for August or September at the latest.

And Mrs. Riley, the cleaning lady at the big old house, turned 70 earlier this year but was still pretty active. She came on Monday and Thursday mornings just as she had for the past five years. Ashlyn noticed she had slowed down a bit and wondered if the job was too much for her. It was one of those conversations that was very difficult to have without offending or pissing off the elderly person. Finally, when she had given the old woman her Christmas bonus at the end of last year the keeper had asked her if she had plans to retire, hoping that would broach the subject for her. What had started as a slightly prickly conversation turned into a real heart to heart between the two women. Mrs. Riley admitted that the big old house was the only one she still cleaned. Her middle daughter, Jean, ran the business for her now and handled the other men and women who did the cleaning for their other clients. They agreed, swearing on the grave of Grandma Lilian, that they would be honest with each other about when it would be time for Mrs. Riley to give up the big old house too. Ashlyn knew, even as she swore on her Grandmother’s grave, that she would never be able to tell the older woman that it was time to go. This would be all on Mrs. Riley’s timetable. The keeper knew Grandma Lilian would understand.

Knight-Harris continued to grow both in numbers of clients and employees. If Ashlyn stopped playing and didn’t have any endorsements at all anymore, the money they made from K-H would be enough to support their family if they behaved themselves and stuck to their spending budget. Luckily, they didn’t have to rely just on K-H income. Ashlyn was making more endorsement money than she ever had before. Nike was still her biggest and best but her other national sponsors, like the bank and the supermarket chain, were very lucrative as well. Some of the new endorsement deals she had gotten were Doc Martens, an expensive European watch company, and, believe it or not, Swiffer. They made a bunch of ads about Ashlyn keeping a clean sheet and being a sweeper keeper. They would have been painful except that the blonde always seemed to make them work. She was able to make fun of herself without making fun of the products she was promoting. That was her great gift. She could be playful and stay respectful at the same time. Then there were the dozens of smaller, more local endorsements that paid less but had a bigger impact at home. She still repped Subaru and drove a Subaru but she secretly wished Jeep had been interested. That’s just about the only car company that she would consider leaving Subaru for.
“Honey, why are you still driving that big truck around? Let’s get you into the new Subaru SUV or something” she suggested to her wife one evening in April.

“It’s all paid for Ash, and it’s great for the dogs or if we need to take a bunch of yard bags to the transfer station, and I like it” Ali shrugged in response as she carefully settled her 7-months pregnant body into their bed. “Why? Does it bother you?”

“No, it doesn’t bother me at all. I just know from driving it in Cambridge myself that it’s not always easy to find a parking spot. There are also a bunch of parking garages in the city that won’t allow full-size trucks anymore” she answered as she waited for her wife to get comfortable and then started massaging her tired legs and feet. “Wouldn’t you rather drive something a little smaller? What do your clients think about your truck?”

“Are you teasing me because you’re my only client anymore?” the brunette quirked an eyebrow at her keeper and smiled.

“No” Ashlyn giggled and kept working on Ali’s right foot. “I really want to know if anybody’s ever asked you about it. Like, why you drive a pick-up truck instead of a fancier car like every other agent on the planet.”

“Sometimes I know it matters what I drive, as stupid as that sounds” she rolled her eyes and then moaned a little at the relief her wife was bringing to her lower extremities as they talked. “And then I’ll just call the car service. Easy. But most of the athletes tell me how much they love the truck.”

“Really?”

“I wouldn’t make that up babe” Ali winked at her keeper who had made her way up to the brunette’s thighs by that point.

“Well, just keep it in mind. There’s no payment for you to drive a Subaru either. Just so you know.”

“You’re telling me these details as if I hadn’t negotiated them for you in the first place” Ali teased and then let out a deep, throaty laugh that turned into a groan when Ashlyn pressed a kiss to the top of her thigh. She spread her legs just a little bit wider and bit her bottom lip as a wave of desire swept over her. “Damn babe.”

Ashlyn, encouraged by the groan and the legs and the breathless sound of her beautiful brunette’s voice, placed a row of slow kisses all across Ali’s pajama clad hips and mound. She loved her horny, pregnant wife a little bit more every single day and was looking forward to showing her just how much as soon as they were done talking about stupid cars and trucks.

“Just for the record” the keeper started seductively, her words were slow and sultry as she climbed higher up Ali’s body towards her delicious mouth. “I love that I’m your only client” she paused to suck on her pulse point for a few seconds before her lips travelled up her neck and across her jaw. “And I plan on keeping you so busy that it always stays that way.”

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When Ashlyn woke up Sunday morning she had one of the worst hangovers of her life. She blinked her eyes, trying to focus on the ceiling that didn’t look at all familiar to her. The keeper was used to not waking up in her own bed anymore, it had been three weeks and two days since she had last done that. But she was pretty sure she wasn’t in the twin bed in the nursery either. Where the fuck was she? She spent a few more painful minutes trying to figure out this latest mystery before settling on hotel as her best guess. Ashlyn rubbed her face with both hands and moaned as her head
pounded. It wasn’t until twenty minutes later when she heard her best friend singing and clanging pots and pans from the kitchen, wherever that was, that she figured out she was at Whitney’s house.

“Here, drink this” the law student pushed a glass of dark looking juice across the kitchen table towards her and then walked back to the counter. “You’ll feel better.”

“What happened last night? I feel like absolute shit” Ashlyn groaned again and drank some of the juice.

“Drink all of it. And take these. Then drink more water” Whitney put two advil on the table with a big glass of water and sat down to eat her breakfast. “What happened last night was you got shitfaced. And you did it faster than any of the young ones too.”

“Well, you know, if you’re gonna do something...”

“It’s not funny Ash” the law student took a bite of her omelet and chewed it as she studied the keeper in front of her. “You look like shit. You’re not sleeping. You’re not taking care of yourself...” she shook her head and looked down at her plate. “If you’re trying to make me feel bad for retiring it won’t work. All it’ll do is piss me off.”

“What? Whit, listen, I’m sorry if I was trouble last night. I really am. I’ll get a cab back to the stadium and let you get back to whatever you had planned for the day” she spoke quietly and sincerely. “I’m really sorry.”

Whitney didn’t say anything as she kept eating and watched Ashlyn drink the entire glass of water after swallowing the pills.

“I’m worried about you and I don’t know what to do about it” she finally admitted and slumped her shoulders. “What can I do about it Ash? You’re not yourself and you haven’t been since...that night. What do you need?”

The keeper smiled sadly at her best friend and started to get up from the table.

“Fuck if I know.”

As she sat in the back of the cab a feeling came over the keeper that she never expected in a million years. She shook her head to try and get it clear and fight the feeling off. But it didn’t work. She couldn’t believe it, but for the first time since Ali had moved into the big old house with her, she didn’t want to go home. The idea of seeing the disapproval on her wife’s face and hearing her voice in the house, but without the love and kindness that usually made it one of her favorite sounds in the world, made her want to throw up. It terrified the blonde to realize that if Drew and Josie weren’t there, she definitely would not be going home today. Somehow, seeing the picture of her family during the Lifetime TV interview the day before had made her feel even worse about the way things were with Ali right now. She had been filled with love and hope as she looked at the picture on the monitor. But then her mind started churning and she remembered when the picture was taken and what happened later that afternoon and how shitty everything had been since then.

Her mood had gotten worse and worse with each passing hour until she was finally out at the bar with her teammates celebrating their win over Seattle. Ashlyn hadn’t even fucking played so she drank to forget that. She drank to forget how scared she still was of the nightmare that haunted her at least three times a week. She drank because Angela Salem kept buying her drinks. She drank because she didn’t understand her wife anymore. She drank because she was pretty sure her wife didn’t even want to try and understand her at all. She drank because she was lonely and tired and afraid and angry. She just fucking drank and kept drinking until Kristie Mewis noticed what was
going on over in the corner of the bar where she and Angela sat huddled around a small table. Whitney and Julie King were having a heart to heart about capturing the team and trying to right the ship and were both unaware of how drunk both Ashlyn and Angela had gotten. When they joined Kristie and tried to get the keeper to leave the bar Ashlyn had gotten agitated and ornery. She was about to cause a pretty big scene but Angela decided she wanted some fresh air and linked elbows with the keeper before walking out onto the dark sidewalk.

Nobody except Whitney had ever seen Ashlyn like that. Shitfaced and belligerent and selfish. And Whitney hadn’t seen her like that since some of her darkest days in college. The keeper and the middie stumbling down the sidewalk, elbows still linked, and talked loudly about what ailed them. Whitney, Kristie and Tasha followed them as closely as they could, ready to step in whenever necessary. Julie had stayed at the bar to keep an eye on the rest of the team. Finally Whitney nodded at Tasha when Ashlyn had started to complain about Ali, knowing her best friend would be horrified at her own behavior once she sobered up. Whitney and Tasha each took one of the keeper’s arms and guided her into the cab Kristie had just hailed for them. Ashlyn put up a fight until her drunk brain decided it was too much effort and stopped trying.

“You gonna be ok with her by yourself?” Tasha asked as she got ready to shut the cab door after Whitney climbed in next to the drunk keeper.

“You. Thanks for your help Tash. I really appreciate it.”

“Text me when you get home and she’s settled down” Kristie said with a nod of her head.

“Will do. You ok getting Ang home?” Whitney asked but knew it was an easy job. The good-natured midfielder was already smiling and agreeable now that she was out of the negative orbit of Ashlyn.

“All good” Kristie waved.

Now Ashlyn was in another cab wondering what the hell had happened to her perfect life and her amazing wife. She found several ways to waste time at the stadium. She rowed until her arms almost fell off and then went into the bathroom and puked her guts out. She took a long, hot shower and changed into some spare workout clothes she had in her locker. She ate an early lunch, talking with some of the NE Revs players that had come in early for their training session, and then walked slowly to her car. She made the drive home, making it take all of the 50 minutes and then a little bit more. She turned off the highway for the final fifteen minutes of the commute and sat at a red light. Ashlyn had been so distracted by her thoughts and worries while she drove home that she hadn’t noticed the front passenger seat, still covered by the hospital sheet. It had been 18 days since she drove Ali home from the hospital and every time she had driven that car since then, she had stared at the sheet covered seat for a minute before starting the engine. That minute and that seat made her frightened, angry and ultimately grateful every time. Today was the first time she hadn’t noticed it. It had taken her 35 minutes to see it this time and that made her furious. She pulled up the driveway and parked the car with only one thing on her mind – she had to get the blood out of that seat. Ali’s blood.

It was just after 1pm and Drew was having his afternoon nap. Ali was feeding Josie on the couch in the family room because she was sick of sitting in the living room all the time. Deb was cleaning up the kitchen and putting the lunch dishes into the dishwasher. She watched Ashlyn jump out of the car like it was on fire and hurry around to the other side and open the door. The keeper pulled her hair up into a messy ponytail and dropped her gear bag by the mudroom door as she grabbed the hose that was coiled there and moved back to her car.

“Alex” Deb called from her spot at the kitchen sink, never taking her eyes off of the blonde. “Come
“Here honey.”

By the time Ali had gotten up off the couch, picked up Josie again and walked to the window where her mother stood watching the activity in the driveway, Ashlyn had gone into the garage and come back out with a large bucket and car wash supplies and was filling the bucket with water from the hose.

“Nice of her to make an appearance” Ali bitched quietly and rolled her eyes.

“Oh hush, just watch. Something’s not right here...”

Deb couldn’t put her finger on it just yet, but she knew something was wrong. The wild look in Ashlyn’s eyes and the tight set of her jaw as she started her task were just the two easiest things to see. What the observers couldn’t see was the sweat pouring down her back and between her breasts as she waited impatiently for the bucket to fill with soapy suds. She hadn’t even done anything yet and her body was already overheating and overstressing. Ashlyn ripped the hospital sheet off of the seat, still folded several times to fit the seat, and threw it to the ground in front of the car. She kicked it once and sent it flying into the air towards the garage and then walked over to the spigot by the mudroom door and turned the water off.

“What’s that?” Deb asked, growing more concerned.

“The sheet, from the hospital...” Ali swallowed and felt a knot in her stomach. “She used it to cover the blood...”

They watched the keeper march back to the sheet and angrily pick it up and ball it up before walking around to the side of the garage and out of sight. They both knew the big trashcan and recycling bin were over there and assumed she was throwing it away. The blonde was back a minute later, dunking a big sponge into the suds and ducking into the car. It was easy to figure out what she was doing, even though it wasn’t that easy to see because she was on the other side of the car.

“Oh Ash...” Ali breathed out as the knot in her stomach got tighter.

Josie finished her bottle and the brunette put her over her shoulder to burp her as she kept watching her wife try to scrub the blood out of the passenger seat of her car.

“Here” Deb said as she took the baby. “You shouldn’t be holding her while you’re standing up. I’ve got her.” She put Josie over her shoulder and started patting her back to coax a burp from her.

Ashlyn scrubbed and scrubbed until the water in the bucket was pink from all the blood she had squeezed out of the sponge. But there was still more fucking blood on the seat. How the fuck could she get it out? She needed something stronger than the sponge. She stood up, shirt and shorts soaking wet from all the water she had slopped onto herself, and put her hands on her hips as she thought. She was out of breath and her chest was heaving as she brought her forearm up and wiped the wet hair from her forehead. All of a sudden she moved into the backyard through the gate between the kitchen and the garage. Deb and Ali moved to the window at the bottom of the backstairs that looked out into the backyard and kept watching the sad show. The keeper went to the grill and grabbed the big, industrial strength grill scrubber with the metal scraper at the end. That would be stronger than the sponge for sure.

“What in the world?” Deb asked as they shifted back to the side window overlooking the driveway again.

Ashlyn jogged to the passenger seat, eager to use her new tool in the fight against the bloodstain. She
thrust it into the bucket of pink, half-soapy water and then began to scrub the seat with the hard, wiry bristles of the brush. She spent another five minutes using that stronger tool but still couldn’t get the blood to come out.

“Fuck!” she yelled in frustration and anger and agony.

Ali sucked in a breath and felt tears spring to her eyes when she heard her keeper’s shout. What was she doing? Why hadn’t she just ordered a new seat? Why had she been driving around all this time with such a gruesome reminder of the scariest night of their lives?

“I have to go stop her...”

“No, Alex” Deb warned, sternly. “She’s not herself right now and I don’t want you to get in the way. God help us if she accidentally hurt you because she didn’t realize you were there.”

“But mom, look at her” Ali pleaded. “I have to help her.”

“I’ll go. You just stay here. Let me put the baby down...”

By now Ashlyn was enraged and she had begun digging into the leather of the seat with the sharp metal scraper at the end of the grill brush. She would rip the fucking seat cover right off if that’s what it took. She dug and ripped and tugged and finally grabbed it with both hands and pulled with all her might. The leather seat cover gave way, all the way to the side of the seat closest to the door. Ashlyn fell backwards when the leather gave and she landed hard on her ass and winced. But the joy and victory she felt far outweighed any pain from the bruised tailbone she had just suffered. She scrambled to her feet to look at her handiwork and froze for almost a full minute.

“Fuck!!!” she yelled even louder this time.

The blood had seeped through the leather seat cover and turned the actual seat cushion itself a reddish pink color. Ashlyn felt nothing but rage coursing through her body and she picked up the grill brush and swung it like an ax at the bloodstained seat cushion. In her fury she hit the interior of her car on some of her upswings and the brush landed on the back of the seat a few times, ripping the leather there as well. She finally stopped, exhausted, her arms screaming at her in pain from her earlier workout at the stadium. There were tears streaming down her face and she looked like a madwoman, soaking wet and breathing in heavy gasps. She kicked the side of the seat twice and then turned and threw the brush at the bucket of pink water. She took two steps and kicked the bucket over, spilling all of that pink, bloody water onto the driveway. She didn’t see Ali come out the kitchen door, moving as fast as she could manage just three weeks after surgery. Ashlyn picked up the half empty bucket and threw it at the front of her car with a guttural yell that terrified the brunette. She watched the bucket bounce off of the car, land on the driveway and start to roll away towards the mudroom. The keeper stood there, panting for breath and sobbing uncontrollably as she tried to focus her eyes on anything. All she could see was the blood. It was pink now but it was on the driveway and on her arms and shirt and on the hood of her car and all over the interior of it now too. Her eyes finally rested on the grill brush on the driveway in front of her. She bent down and picked it up, wet and heavy and pink now like everything else. Ashlyn turned sideways so she was facing the backyard, behind the house. She wound up and took three steps before hurling the brush as far as she could across the backyard and into the spare lot. She heard it hit the big huge rock and then bounce off of a tree as she fell to her hands and knees. Ashlyn let the sobs take over. She could barely feel the hard driveway biting into her knees or the cut on her forearm that she didn’t even know she had. She felt the exhaustion starting to carry her away and she was almost relieved. She wasn’t sure if she was going to pass out or just go to sleep but she didn’t care. She just wanted the blood to go away. She could still smell it, just like she had that night when she drove as fast as she could to the hospital to try and save the love of her life, at any cost.
“Ashlyn, sweetheart, you’re ok honey. It’s ok. Everything’s going to be alright now.”

She heard the voice she loved above all others and then she felt soft, strong hands on her bicep and her back as Ali tried to soothe and comfort her. Was it a dream? Was she imagining it?

“Babe, I’m here. I’ve got you. You’re alright now. I love you.”
I Saved My Daughter's Life!

Chapter Notes

I couldn't leave you hanging like that.

Ashlyn felt more hands helping her to her feet and guiding her back through the kitchen door and up the backstairs. She could still hear Ali’s voice talking to her and reassuring her as she was helped into the big soaking tub in the master bathroom, wet clothes still on her.

“Ali?”

“Shhhh, it’s ok. I’m here sweetheart. I’m right here. We’re going to take a nice bath and just relax.”

“I couldn’t...get the blood out” she choked out as she started to cry again. “I’m so sorry.”

“Oh Ashlyn, my love, you did a great job. It’s ok now. You don’t have to worry about the blood anymore, ok?”

The brunette knelt next to the tub and pulled her wife’s soaked t-shirt and sports bra over her head, dropping them behind her on the tiled floor with a ‘thwop’. She leaned over and tugged on the sides of Ashlyn’s shorts but had to straighten right back up because of the pain in her belly.

“Ash, I need you to take your shorts and underwear off for me” she patted the blonde’s knee to make sure she had her attention.

The keeper lifted her hips and pushed her clothes off and down to her ankles, lifting her legs up so Ali could pull them off for her and add them to the pile behind her.

“Good job. Thank you.” Ali cupped her face and stroked her cheek with her thumb as she spoke softly. “Just close your eyes and let me give you a bath now honey.”

She filled the tub with only eight inches of water at first. It was pink and she wanted to get Ashlyn all rinsed off before she drained the tub and then filled it up again with clean, non-pink water. The brunette used the big cup that they kept by the tub for when Ashlyn washed her hair for her during her pampering baths, and rinsed her keeper off completely. It nearly killed her to do it because she had to reach across the tub so she could fill the cup from the tap each time, and the pain in her abdomen was intense. She knew this wasn’t going to work.

“Ash, will you stay here for a minute while I go get something for our bath?”

“Mnnm hmm” the blonde hummed in response as she started to enjoy the warm water that was finally filling the tub.

Ali was back in five minutes with a couple bottles of water, a bottle of Gatorade and a couple of protein bars. She also had the roll of saran wrap from the kitchen and put it on the vanity after handing her wife the bottle of water and telling her to drink it. The brunette took her clothes off, relieved that Ashlyn still had her eyes closed, and wrapped saran wrap around her hips and lower abdomen to cover and protect her incision. She wasn’t supposed to take a bath yet because her incision wasn’t supposed to be submerged. She could take a shower but she couldn’t soak in a tub.
and risk getting an infection at her scar. She had just argued with her mother in the kitchen about her plan but she knew what she was doing. Ali carefully stepped into the tub after making sure the bottles of water and Gatorade and protein bars were all within reach along the back of the tub. She was thankful for the bubbles covering her pregnancy pouch. Just like last time, she was shy and self-conscious about her postpartum body. But Ashlyn needed her right now so the rules and her own discomfort would just have to wait.

“Drink some more water please” she asked as she picked up the bath pouf and began to wash her wife’s body.

Ali sat opposite her keeper and started with her feet and legs and then scooched up to wash her arms and her torso. She was tender as she scrubbed the pain and stress and anger off of Ashlyn’s skin. They were both quiet and the blonde kept her eyes closed for almost the whole thirty minutes they were in the tub together. It was as if she was afraid to open them and break some sort of spell that had been cast to bring she and Ali back together.

“You should drink some Gatorade too” Ali suggested several minutes later after she had finished washing and rinsing her long blonde hair, twice. “And I brought up a protein bar if you’re hungry too.”

“Thank you baby” the keeper finally opened her eyes and squinted from having them closed for so long. “I can’t get over the feeling of déjà vu right now” she chuckled, sounding more like herself again.

Ali could think of a hundred times they had shared a bath and needed more info before she could understand what her wife was thinking about.

“Oh yeah? We’ve been in here together lots of times. From when?” she asked as she squeezed out the bath pouf and hung it to dry.

“February 8th 2016, the day...”

“After the Super Bowl” Ali finished for her and grinned. “That was a pretty big day. Lots of important things going on and you remember the bath?” She quirked an eyebrow at the keeper. “I wasn’t even in it with you.”

“No” Ashlyn chuckled again. “But you brought me a bottle of water, a bottle of Gatorade and some protein bars because I was so frozen you didn’t know what else to do.”

“That’s not true. I knew what to do. I got you into the tub didn’t I?” she asked with a giggle.

“Yeah, you’re right” Ashlyn smiled back at her from her end of the tub. “But it’s funny you brought up the exact same three things this time too. Don’t you think?”

“Maybe they’re just the right three things to bring up to a person who is probably dehydrated, could use some extra electrolytes and maybe hasn’t eaten all day” the brunette replied with a little sass and a smile.

“Well thank you Al. For saving me then and for saving me now.” Ashlyn’s face and voice were serious and sincere.


“Oh shit! That’s right, your incision” Ashlyn’s face immediately filled with concern and alarm.
“It’s ok Ash. Relax” she soothed. “I took some precautions but I don’t want to push my luck.”

The keeper frowned in confusion but snapped out of it so she could help her wife out of the tub. She stood up and held her hands out for Ali to hold onto. They both knew it was going to hurt when she stood up.

“Ready?” Ashlyn asked with an encouraging look. As soon as Ali nodded, she counted. “One, two, three.”

Ali yelped as she let her strong keeper help her to her feet and steady her when she wobbled from the pain.

“Son of a bitch” she muttered under her breath and stepped out of the tub, unwrapping the saran wrap as she moved towards the shower.

She could feel Ashlyn’s eyes on her and it made her anxious, even though it was just her backside.

“Is that saran wrap?” the blonde asked, impressed.

“Yeah. I thought it would help keep the incision dry. It worked pretty well too” she offered shyly as she dropped the wad of plastic wrap on the vanity and stepped into the shower.

When she finished her quick shower Ashlyn was waiting for her with a towel and kept her eyes on the cinnamon ones in front of her.

“My turn.”

Ali saw that the tub had been drained and rinsed and the wet clothes wrung out and hung up. The keeper had tidied everything up and finished her Gatorade and a protein bar too. As the brunette dried herself off, put her robe on and combed out her wet hair she felt some of the sadness and confusion and disappointment sneak into the room. As frightened as she had been watching Ashlyn lose herself in the driveway, this emergency time-out had felt wonderful. She wouldn’t deny it.

“I’m afraid to open the door too” Ashlyn admitted quietly as she stepped out of the shower and reached for a towel. “Thank you for helping me Al. I didn’t mean for any of this to happen. I just wanted to wash the seat.”

“Ashlyn” Ali turned to face her wife who had modestly wrapped herself up in the towel. “We need to talk and I think we should probably go see Mattie. But, it was nice to feel close to you again” she paused and dropped her eyes. “I miss you so much.”

“You want to talk?” the optimism in Ashlyn’s voice filled Ali’s heart and broke it at the same time. How had they gotten to the point where the mere idea of talking was something that brought her keeper so much joy.

“Yes, I want to talk. The sooner the better. Whitney and my mom are downstairs...”

“Whit’s here?”

“Well, yeah, who did you think helped my mom get you upstairs and put you in the tub?”

Ashlyn looked down, embarrassed and ashamed.

“I uh, had no idea” she cleared her throat shyly. “It felt like a dream. Everything you said was too good to be true so I figured I was dreaming.”
“What did I say?” the brunette tried to remember her words but she had been so worried about Ashlyn that she could barely remember saying anything.

“Just that it was ok. That I was ok. You said you were with me and you loved me and that everything would be alright...that’s what I heard anyway.”

Ashlyn’s comment about Ali’s words being too good to be true stung the brunette and made her shake her head sadly.

“Not too good to be true” she said with a little bit of bite. “Just true. I meant what I said Ash.”

“See, you’re mad at me again. We haven’t even opened the damned door yet...”

“Ashlyn! You didn’t even come home last night. You didn’t call or text or anything. You’re damned right I’m mad at you.”

The cut on the keeper’s forearm was bleeding and the blood stained the fluffy white towel she had tucked up under her armpits. She seemed unaware of it but Ali saw it and moved to one of the drawers in the vanity to get the first aid kit.

“Here, your arm is bleeding” she sighed as she opened the kit and pulled out some antiseptic wipes and a few different sized bandaids. “Come here, let me take a look.”

Ashlyn looked down quickly at her arm and saw the blood on the towel and rolled her eyes as she let out a frustrated sigh. She took two steps and stood in front of Ali who had sat down on top of the toilet with the supplies she needed on her lap. The brunette gently pressed the antiseptic wipe to the cut and cleaned up the blood so she could see how bad it was. The blonde winced and sucked in a breath when she felt the sting on the inside of her left forearm.

“Sorry.” Ali’s voice was quiet as she worked. She squinted and pulled her wife’s beautifully tattooed arm closer to her face so she could see better. There was a thin red cut, about three inches long and it ran lengthwise up her arm towards the inside of her elbow. It was just below the bottom feather of the dreamcatcher tattoo, where it met the curls of Zeus’ hair.

“It’s not too bad, I don’t think” the brunette pointed at the first aid kit. “Can you hand me the kit? None of the bandaids are long enough. We’ll have to use a gauze pad and tape.”

“I don’t even know what I cut it on” Ashlyn offered in a quiet voice as she handed the first aid kit to her wife and watched her open a gauze pad and apply a good blob of Neosporin to the cut. “I’m sorry Al.”

Ali spread the Neosporin around with the gauze pad and then placed it diagonally so it completely covered the whole length of the cut. Ashlyn rotated her arm so the pad would stay in place while the brunette got a piece of the white, medical adhesive tape and secured it to her skin. Three pieces of tape later and they were done. The keeper couldn’t help enjoying the proximity of her beautiful wife and the gentle touch of her hands as they worked on her skin.

“You must have hit it with the grill brush, the sharp scraper end” Ali surmised after replaying the scene in her mind. “It’s thin and not too deep so I don’t think you need stitches or anything. But that grill brush was probably filthy so we’ll have to change the pad a lot to make sure it doesn’t get infected.”

“Ok. I can do that” she smiled sheepishly at her wife as their eyes met for the first time since the first
aid had begun. “I’m sorr…”

“Ashlyn. Stop apologizing for what happened in the driveway” she couldn’t hide the exasperation from her voice. “And start apologizing for last night instead.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m really sorry I didn’t text you last night. Really, I fucked up and I’m sorry. I was drunk and…”

“You went and celebrated with the team, it’s ok Ash, I just wish you would have been more considerate…”

“I know Al. I’m sorry. It was a shitty thing to do and I’m really really sorry.”

The keeper was standing close in front of Ali who was still sitting on the toilet because her wife was blocking her from doing anything else. Their eyes met again and Ali could see the sincere remorse on Ashlyn’s face. What bothered Ali about Ashlyn getting drunk last night and not texting her was that when her keeper usually drank too much she became a big mushy teddy bear who couldn’t stop herself from telling Ali how much she loved her. That obviously hadn’t happened last night or she would have texted her a hundred times, proclaiming her love more romantically each time. It was just one more thing that made the brunette sad that day.

“Ok. Thanks” she said weakly and tried to smile. She patted Ashlyn’s thigh in front of her and handed her the first aid kit to put away. “I’m going to get dressed but then I’d like to talk, if that’s ok with you?” she asked with a questioning but hopeful look on her face.

“Yeah, definitely” the keeper answered, backed up and put the first aid kit on the vanity as her wife moved to the door of the bathroom and opened it. “I’ll be right out.” She paused. “Thanks again” she waved her bandaged arm in front of her and smiled softly.

“You’re welcome. See you in a minute.”

A few minutes later they traded places so Ashlyn could get dressed and Ali could pee, and then met next to Ashlyn’s side of the bed. They were both awkward and nervous and the fact that the other person was obviously feeling the same way made them both feel better. Ali shifted her weight as she stood there and winced a little bit. All of the bending and reaching she had done in the bathtub and then shower was catching up to her and she was sore.

“Here, sit down, you must be really sore after all of that” Ashlyn nodded over her shoulder towards the bathroom as she patted the bed and propped up the pillows against the headboard on her own side of the bed.

“Thanks” Ali smiled and sat down, letting Ashlyn help her. “I’m ok, just a little sore.”

The blonde smiled at her and took her seat at the end of the bed so she was facing her wife with her right leg bent up under her and her left leg on the floor. There was another awkward silence as they got comfortable and took a couple of deep breaths.

“Ash, I… I just want to apologize for being so hard on you about the way you answered Patty’s question in the Emergency room. I shouldn’t have been so bitchy about it without knowing more about what was going on with you. You’re right. I wasn’t there.” She took a deep breath and wished she didn’t have to say the next sentence. “I don’t think I’ll ever like your answer” she paused and looked down, not wanting to see the hurt on her wife’s face, “but I’ll never know that until I find out what you were thinking and feeling.”

Ashlyn felt her anger spike and tried not to let it show. Why couldn’t Ali just fucking apologize
without having to tell her she still wouldn’t like her fucking answer? Why did she have to say it like that? She looked at her lap to try and calm down and stay in control. She did not want to be the one who lost her temper in the first talk they’d had since they fought eight days ago. Ali wasn’t sure how to take the silence so she kept talking, a little irked that Ashlyn couldn’t even acknowledge her apology.

“And, um, after today I think it’s safe to say we both have some shit going on that’s maybe making it harder than usual for us to talk through this” she sighed and felt a pang of anger at being the only one doing any talking.

“Yeah” Ashlyn said quickly, recognizing the flash of irritability she had just seen pass across Ali’s face. “I’ve got to work some things out. Can’t pretend that’s not true anymore” she chuckled sadly and began to play with the inseam of her long shorts, dropping her eyes to her lap again.

“Are you ok Ash?” Ali asked softly and tenderly. “I mean, should I be worried that you’re going to disappear on me again?”

She hadn’t meant it to sound accusatory at all. She was truly, sincerely worried about the mental health of her keeper and wanted to know where her head was at. Whitney was worried too! That’s why she had driven all the way up to the big old house when she couldn’t get her best friend to answer her phone after she left her house that morning. But to Ashlyn’s ears, it had sounded like a bitchy, passive-aggressive way to blame her for all their problems. The keeper set her jaw and looked at Ali for a long minute before she said anything. Ali knew she had hit a nerve and was trying to figure out what she had said that had pissed the blonde off.

“Well, I’ll be disappearing to New Jersey on Wednesday for the Sky Blue game Thursday night. If that’s alright with you?” Ashlyn’s words were full of snark.

“Oh, I didn’t think you were going to travel with the team until after the EUROs” Ali replied evenly, trying to keep the bite out of her voice even though Ashlyn was being a jackass right at the moment.

“Well you sure as hell don’t want me around here. You’ve made that painfully obvious” the keeper rolled her eyes and tried, not very successfully, to rein in her attitude. “I told coach I was good to go for Thursday’s game. It’ll be my first start since Chicago.”

Ali knew it was killing Ashlyn to split time with Abby Smith that year and then to have to give up her two starts since Josie had been born on top of that...well the brunette knew her wife had a lot of resentment in her heart those days. She just wasn’t sure who exactly it was directed at. And that frightened her to her core.

“I know we’ve been fighting this week, but I always want you around here Ashlyn, always.”

“No you don’t” the keeper was able to tone down the attitude in her words a bit so they were mostly just sad and defeated this time instead of snarky and bitchy. “You pretended to be asleep when I came in to try and talk to you that night. I wanted to apologize to you and tell you how much I loved you and how much more important you were to me than some stupid question that didn’t even matter anymore” her voice was low and she had tears in her eyes as she continued to focus on her lap. “You fucking pretended to be asleep Ali. Like I don’t even know what you sound like when you’re asleep. Like I haven’t spent five and a half years sharing a bed with you and loving you and making a life with you. That was...that was just too much.”

Her voice was practically a whisper by the time she stopped talking and the tears slid down her cheeks as she sat there tugging at the leg of her shorts. Ali brought her hands up to her face and rubbed it as she groaned and let out a very frustrated sigh. She was about to give up on this stupid
attempt to work things out with her keeper. The brunette had her mouth open to tell Ashlyn to have a nice fucking trip and make everything even worse than it already was. But at the very last second she heard the sound of Drew’s feet in the second floor hallway. It was almost 4pm and he must have woken up from his nap. The sound of his little heels as he ran around the hallway, waiting for Deb or Whitney to come up and open the gate for him so he could practice going down the stairs by himself, was like a sedative for the brunette. Everything slowed down for her and she steadied her racing heartbeat and closed her mouth before her bitchy statement ever left her lips. She couldn’t give up now. No matter how hard it was. Both she and Ashlyn were hurting and struggling but it was about so much more than just the two of them anymore. She had to dig deep for Drew and for Josie even if she couldn’t do it for herself yet.

“I want to show you something” she commented as she moved to get up off the bed.

“Whoa” Ashlyn saw her wife wince when she moved. “Let me get it, whatever it is” she said as she stood up.

“Thanks” Ali smiled up at her kind keeper. That right there, that sweetness and kindness that wouldn’t leave Ashlyn even when she was mixed up and behaving like a brat, that’s why Ali would keep trying. “My journal, in my nightstand, please.”

Ashlyn walked around the bed and was back in a minute and handed the brunette her journal with the picture of the elephant on it. Ali didn’t write in her journal the way Ashlyn wrote in hers. The blonde wrote about her day or days and described what she had experienced or thought or felt during the day. It was like reading a diary of sorts. Ali wrote in her journal to get things out of her head or to figure things out or to make lists of things to do or try or see. There often weren’t even dates on any of the pages. It was messy and chaotic and raw. The brunette flipped towards the back half of the book and moved to a few pages before the bookmark string that was attached to the binding.

“Will you come sit with me for a minute?” she asked and patted the bed next to her. Her heart broke even more when Ashlyn hesitated. “I just want to look at this with you. You don’t have to stay.”

The sorrow in her voice was too much for the keeper and she crawled carefully up the bed to lean against the headboard and pillows next to her wife. Ashlyn thought about that last sentence. ‘You don’t have to stay.’ That’s all she ever wanted to do – stay right by Ali’s side. How had she gotten so confused and angry and petty and scared that the brunette had to utter that sentence? Ashlyn would have bet her life that there would never ever be a time when Ali would need to say that sentence to her. How could she possibly ever not want to stay? It was nonsensical, ridiculous, absurd. Yet here they were.

“I’ve been trying to figure out what’s bothering me so much this time, with the baby” Ali began nervously. “I want to figure it out so I can stop being so angry and frustrated and sad and everything else. I haven’t figured it out yet, but I’m really trying Ash, I promise you I am...”

“I know you are Al. I know” the tenderness was back in the keeper’s voice and it gave Ali hope.

“I get frustrated sometimes when I can’t understand what you’re thinking or feeling. Like right now and earlier today and last Sunday when we had the fight.” She paused and flipped another page. “But I haven’t tried to tell you how I’m feeling or what I’m struggling with either. I wanted to wait until I understand it better myself, that’s what I’ve been waiting for” she admitted shyly, realizing how silly it sounded when she said it out loud. “I know that sounds dumb. Like you won’t be able to understand it unless I present it to you perfectly or something” she rolled her eyes and sighed, frustrated with herself. “I was about to get up and walk out of this room a few minutes ago but we’ve been...I’ve been doing too much of that lately and it doesn’t help anything. Can I show you what I think I’ve figured out about myself so far?”
Ashlyn nodded and gave her wife a small, encouraging half-smile and they spent the next ten minutes looking over several pages of her journal. There was a page with a column of things, emotions, reactions and half of them were crossed out. Some of them had arrows from them that pointed to a different feeling or failure or frustration on the next page. There were notes in there with page numbers referencing books and sometimes Ali had written a quote from a book if she thought it was important enough.

“I was in such a bad mood at the hospital and at first I thought it was just a reaction to the surgery or the anesthesia or the painkillers or something like that. I kept trying to find some outside thing that was causing me to be angry and upset all the time. I finally realized that there wasn’t an outside influence. It was me. It was my own stuff that was making me so mad at everything, all the time.”

“What do you mean?” Ashlyn asked quietly, trying to understand.

“Well, you know how I like to plan things out, right?”

“Yeah, of course” the keeper nodded, still looking at the pages of the journal that was half on her lap and half on Ali’s lap.

“With Drew we were all ready. He was late and I couldn’t wait for him to be born. I couldn’t have been any more ready to meet him.” She paused and made sure Ashlyn was with her. “Well how awful would it be for someone like me to give birth before the house was ready for the baby? And before I was ready for the baby?”

“Probably pretty awful.”

“You’ve always been able to roll with the punches and it’s one of my favorite things about you. But that’s not my forte.”

“No, it is not” Ashlyn chuckled softly before she could even stop herself. “Sorry.”

“It’s not funny, but it’s ok” Ali turned back to a page she wanted to show her wife. “Here’s what all of this comes down to, as far as I can figure it out so far. I woke up covered in blood and freaked out. I passed out, terrified, on the way to the hospital. I mean, the last thing I remember thinking was ‘God please don’t let my baby die’.” She swallowed and took a couple of seconds to collect herself before continuing. “Then I wake up in the recovery room alone, no baby, no wife, no doctor, no fucking clue what was going on. That was one of the worst parts of the whole thing, honestly. Not knowing if she...if she was even alive.”

“Jesus Al” Ashlyn put her arm around her shoulders and squeezed them for a minute. “That’s terrible. I’m so sorry honey.”

“I know. And I knew then that if you weren’t there with me that you were with our daughter, I just knew it and that was the second thing that made me happy.”
“What was the first thing?”

“Just that she was alive. I really thought I was going to lose her when I saw all that blood. I really thought...”

“But you didn’t” Ashlyn squeezed her shoulders again. “You fought like hell and you brought her to us, safe and sound.”

“Then when we get to our room, you and Patty come in and I find out you haven’t even been able to hold her yet, no skin to skin, nothing” she stopped and wiped a tear away. “I know it seems like such a little thing, but it’s such a big deal to her, to the baby. She must have been so scared and so cold and so alone...”

“And then you found out you couldn’t breastfeed” Ashlyn jumped ahead a little bit to the part that she already knew had fucked her wife up. “Man, what a fucking afternoon you had.”

“Patty tells me I can’t get out of bed for two days and that’s when I really thought I was going to lose it” Ali chuckled and quirked her eyebrow. “But you talked to Patty about bringing me down on a gurney so I could meet our baby girl. I swear Ash, I don’t think I could have loved you any more than I did at that moment. I really think I would have had some sort of nervous breakdown if you hadn’t thought of that.”

They were quiet for a few minutes, Ashlyn holding Ali and Ali leaning into her keeper’s embrace. The brunette was happy she had thought about her journal. She knew this little tete a tete wasn’t going to solve everything but it sure felt like a step in the right direction.

“And all of those fears and doubts and disappointments just got worse the longer I was in the hospital. I felt alone and like I had failed at giving Josie the birth she deserved. I felt like I had done something wrong and that’s why everything was so messed up. That’s why she was sick...I hadn’t done a good enough job...” she squeaked out the last few words as her emotions finally got the better of her and her tears started.

Ashlyn quickly took the journal off of her wife’s lap and gave her a pillow to hold against her incision while she cried. She didn’t say anything to her. She just kept her arm around her shoulder and held her like that. The keeper had no idea all of that had been going on inside her beautiful brunette’s head and heart. She knew Ali was upset about missing the special connection because of not breastfeeding, but to think that she thought everything that had happened was her fault. Well, that was just too awful.

“You know none of that’s true, right?” Ashlyn ventured after several minutes of crying and holding and quiet. “You know that you’re the reason she’s even on this earth right now don’t you? I mean, do you really understand that Ali?”

“I know Patty said that I was in good shape and healthy and that’s why the tear in my uterus didn’t happen until the 9th month...”

“Exactly! God, honey, I think you’re the only person on the planet who doesn’t see how fucking amazing you are and what an incredible thing you did. If I do nothing else as long as I live I’m going to get you to grasp just how amazing you did with this pregnancy. Everything about it was twice as hard as Drew’s, and that means you had to work twice as hard and so did Josie. I did some research and do you know how many babies die when there’s a tear in the uterus?”

“Jesus Ashlyn, no and I don’t want to know. What’s wrong with you?” Ali sat up and gave her wife a sharp look.
“But that’s the whole fucking point Al. A lot. Ok? A lot of babies die and some mothers too. They don’t make it past the fifth or sixth month before the uterus tears and it’s over. It’s a big fucking deal. But Josie didn’t die. And you didn’t die. And the reason she’s with us today is because your body somehow found a way to get her what she needed all the way into your ninth month. It wasn’t luck that saved her. It was you and everything you did to take care of your body and your self and your baby. We weren’t just lucky sweetheart. YOU made this happen. YOU saved both of you and I don’t care what outstanding thing I ever do for the rest of my life, it’ll never ever come close to what you did this year for our baby.”

Ali leaned back into her wife and was quiet for several minutes as she thought about everything Ashlyn had just said. Maybe she had been looking at it all wrong. Maybe the blonde was right. She was brought out of her thoughts when her wife put the journal back on her lap again and handed the pen to her.

“I think you need to write something really important down in there. Right on the cover page so you see it every time you open it.”

The brunette looked up at her quizzically as she took the pen in her right hand.

“You need to write down ‘I saved my daughter’s life’ in big, bold letters.”

Ali ducked her head, shyly, and blinked up at her keeper. “Ash...” she said, almost as a chastisement.

“I’m absolutely serious” Ashlyn held her ground. “Do it. I’m going to watch you to make sure you write it big enough too.” She smiled at her unsure wife. “Go on, write it.”

The brunette felt silly and self-conscious as she flipped to the back cover page of the journal and started to write the capital letter I.

“Bigger, twice as big as that” the keeper corrected her. “Put it across both pages.”

Ali hesitated and chewed her bottom lip as she thought about it. How many times had she taken the plunge with this woman? How many times had her keeper urged her to try something and been there for her once she finally took the leap? Too many to count was the answer she quickly came up with. She shrugged her shoulders and moved the I over and wrote it twice as big so the sentence covered both of the back cover pages of her journal. She traced over the letters a couple of times and made them darker and bolder, etching them into the thick paper.

“That’s it” the blonde smiled, leaned over and kissed her wife’s head as she finished the assignment. “That’s what I’m talking about honey. You fucking did that and you should be proud of it every day of your life. I know I won’t ever let you forget it.”

Ali smiled down at the large, dark words and was surprised, although she really shouldn’t have been, that she felt better and lighter and stronger about everything. And it was all because of one sentence...

‘I Saved My Daughter’s Life!’
When it was Ashlyn’s turn to share with Ali what she was struggling with that Sunday afternoon in the bedroom she tried to get out of it. She said it was too late in the day and that she didn’t want to mess up dinnertime with Drew. She made three or four more lame excuses before finally telling her wife the truth.

“I’m just not ready yet. I’m not sure I can go back there again” her face was pale and angst-ridden as she spoke and Ali knew she was being as honest as ever.

“But I need to know what happened to you, just like you needed to know what happened to me” the brunette urged without pushing too hard. “It’s important honey.”

“I know it is” the blonde got up off the bed and started pacing along the foot of the bed. “Maybe tomorrow. Maybe I’ll be able to do it tomorrow, but I just can’t do it right now.”

“Ok, it’s alright” Ali could see how agitated her keeper had just gotten and she didn’t want to undo all of the work they had done since her episode in the driveway four hours ago. “We’ll go at your pace. But Ashlyn, you have to promise me one thing.”

“What?” the blonde stopped pacing and looked at her wife still sitting up against the headboard.

“Promise me you won’t shut me out anymore. We won’t shut each other out. You have to keep talking to me, even if it’s not about this one thing. Ok? Promise me” Ali challenged, her face pleading with her wife.

“I promise” Ashlyn agreed with a small smile. “I’m sorry Ali, I know you’re disappointed in me. I’m disappointed in me too...”

“I’m not disappointed” the brunette countered with a concerned look on her face and compassion in her eyes. “I’m worried about you. I just want you to be ok sweetheart.”

“Me too.”

Ashlyn helped her wife off the bed and they hugged for a long time, just holding each other close. They breathed each other in deeply and it made them both feel much better. It was like reinforcements had just been sent to both of their hearts and souls and the repair work would begin soon. They went down the backstairs and joined dinnertime, only a few minutes late. After they had eaten Ashlyn wrapped her best friend up in a big hug, right in the middle of the kitchen so Deb and Ali had to walk around them as they cleared the dishes and played with Drew and the dogs, respectively. When they finally separated they both had tears in their eyes and laughed at each other for being a cryface.

“Alright” Ashlyn said with a genuine grin on her face. “Who wants to take the dogs for a walk with me?”

Ashlyn finally tells Ali what it was like for her the night Josie was born.
Both Whitney and Drew stuck their arms up in the air and, after a few minutes of bug spraying the boy, they set off for their evening walk. Drew had slept later during his nap so they weren’t worried about him having a meltdown later that evening during bathtime.

“Thanks for everything mom” Ali gave her mother a strong hug as they sat in the family room enjoying a few minutes of quiet before it would be time to wake Josie up and feed her.

“Of course honey, is everything ok?” she asked, concern creasing her face.

“Well I feel a lot better” the brunette chuckled. “But she still won’t talk to me. Something’s really wrong mom. It almost reminds me of Carol’s PTSD episode that Christmas, remember?”

“Like any of us will ever forget that” Deb’s eyes went wide. “But I think you’re right. What happened in the driveway, that’s not normal Alex.”

“I know. I’m going to make an appointment with Mattie. Hopefully she can see us Wednesday morning. It’s Ashlyn’s travel day so she’ll be off until the afternoon.”

“I thought she wasn’t travelling until...”

“Me too. Surprise” Ali made a pained face and half-heartedly waved her hands around, making her mother chuckle. “I’ll bring Drew to daycare that day or at least that morning. Can you watch Josie for me?”

“Absolutely. Whatever you want. And you’ve gotta get rid of that car.”

“Ooh, thanks for reminding me. I’m having Suburu pick that up tomorrow and bring her something else. She can drive my truck to training tomorrow. I should go grab her keys and get everything out of there.”

“Whitney already did it. It’s empty and as clean as it’s going to get. She took it to the car wash and had the interior done. Then she cleaned up all the mess in the driveway too.”

“Oh my God, you guys are just the best” Ali fought her emotions, touched again by the generosity of her mom and Whitney. “What the hell would we ever do without you guys?”

“Julie Donaldson came over to check on things too” Deb took a sip of wine as she watched her daughter’s face contort into worry.

“No, no, nothing like that” Deb patted her daughter’s knee. “She was the only one home this afternoon. Justin was at basketball camp and Neil took the girls with him camping this weekend. Julie was about to come over and help get Ashlyn inside when Whitney pulled up. Two knights in shining armor to our rescue today.”

“I’ll have to call her tomorrow and thank her. And explain I guess.”

“No need baby girl. Moms understand things. Plus she’s a nurse so she really understands things” Deb smiled at her daughter. “I just told her the Reader’s Digest version of your complication, no details, and finished with Ashlyn trying to get the blood stain out of her passenger seat. Julie understood. I like her a lot.”

“Yeah, we totally lucked out with those guys. They’re both wonderful and their kids are pretty great...
“Are you really feeling better honey?” Deb asked cautiously. “It’s ok if you’re not you know. You’ve been through a lot too.”

“I know. And yeah, I am feeling better. I was really beating myself up for not having a good enough pregnancy or delivery...”

“Oh Alex...”

“I know. I just wasn’t ready for any of it and I just felt like I failed her, you know?” Ali fought back some tears. “And my wife, you know the one I’m really worried about, knew just what to say to me to make it ok” she smiled. “Just when I think I want to throttle her, she always does the sweetest thing and I can’t even remember why I was mad at her in the first place.”

“What did she say?”

“She just helped me look at everything from another point of view. I’ll have to keep working on it because you know I’ll keep going back and criticizing myself, but she made me believe that I saved Josie instead of failed her.”

“She’s absolutely right honey” Deb leaned over and gave her daughter another big hug. “Try not to forget it. You’re the best little mother I’ve ever known and both your kids are lucky to have you. Don’t forget that either” she grinned at her girl as they pulled apart.

“Parenthood is scary and you’re allowed to not know what to do sometimes. But that’s why there’s two of you. You’re a team and you pick each other up when you’re down and tackle things together. That’s what makes it work.”

“But what happens when you’re both down? How do you pick each other up then? That’s what it feels like is happening with us.”

“That’s when your village comes in. Your best friends and your moms and your dads. It happens to all of us honey. Don’t feel bad. You haven’t failed at anything. Keep your head up and your heart open and you guys will be better before you know it.”

The next two days were odd but better. Ali was officially really concerned about Ashlyn’s mental health so she backed off of her issue with the keeper’s ER decision altogether. They would need to revisit it at some point, sooner rather than later, but it wasn’t the most important thing that week by a longshot. The fact that Ali could see that was a testament to how much clearer her head was already. Ashlyn didn’t like the kid gloves her wife was treating her with but they were better than the ice chamber they had been living in so she sucked it up and focused on appreciating the small kindnesses the brunette was showing her. Like the way Ali made a point of inspecting and changing the bandage on her forearm cut three times a day. It was sweet and cute and it made them both feel good for those ten-minute episodes. On Monday afternoon Ashlyn was napping on their bed while Drew was down for his own nap. Ali quietly closed both doors to their bedroom and then climbed onto the bed and spooned her girl from behind. She was afraid to wake her up but she couldn’t resist her keeper’s physical pull. There wasn’t anything sexual about it. They napped together for a little less than an hour but it was the most normal intimacy they had shared since Josie had been born.

They had one minor dust-up and it happened Monday night when Ali tried to get Ashlyn to sleep in their bed and all through the night. Ali wanted to get up and do all of the feedings so her keeper could get a good, solid night’s sleep. Ashlyn refused, politely, the first three times they talked about it. Then, finally, when they were sitting in the living room with Deb they argued about it one last
“Ash, you’re falling asleep” Ali said softly to her wife from her seat next to her on the couch. “Why don’t you just go up to bed babe. I’ve got our girl tonight.” She rubbed Ashlyn’s arm gently and squeezed her shoulder. “I think it’ll be so good for you to get a whole night’s sleep in your own bed.”

“I know you think that Al” the keeper complained, louder and more harshly than she meant to. “You’ve been nagging me all day about this and you’re not listening.”

“Well why don’t you tell me what it is that I’m missing then?” the brunette replied, practically biting her tongue off as she tried not to lose her temper.

“I can’t fucking sleep!” Ashlyn sat up abruptly and then looked sheepishly at Deb on the other side of the couch. “I haven’t been able to sleep without having a nightmare and then a heart attack since...since...”

“I have been listening Ash, and that’s the very first time you’ve told me about these nightmares.” Ali put her hand on her wife’s thigh and spoke carefully. “I knew you had that one on the couch when everybody was at the Horribles parade but I had no idea it happened every night.”

“I can’t sleep anyway so I may as well take the night shift so you can at least get your rest and get your body healed up. There’s no sense both of us losing sleep.”

“But don’t you think you should...”

“I don’t know what to do about it Al!” Ashlyn stood up and stormed out of the room.

The keeper had also not been thrilled about Ali swapping out her Subaru without her permission but she knew it was the right thing to do and that she didn’t have a leg to stand on when it came to protesting it. She should have done it herself the day they came home from the hospital. It was weird and disturbing that she kept driving around in a car with a seat full of her wife’s blood and she knew it. It was like a demon that she needed to try and exorcise. Somewhere in her brain she had convinced herself that if she could get rid of the blood in her car the nightmares would stop.

Ali had told Whitney about the appointment Wednesday morning with Mattie. She wanted the law-student’s blessing and help if necessary. The fact that Whitney had agreed to both so quickly was all the proof Ali needed that Ashlyn was in real trouble. If Whitney was that worried about her then she knew it was serious.

“Do you need me to come with you Al? Because I will. I’d be happy to” Whitney’s concerned voice came through loud and clear over the phone.

“I think that’s a great idea. But, do you think she’ll feel ganged up on?”

“Ooh, good point. I hadn’t thought of that.”

They both thought for a few minutes before Whitney spoke again.

“I think it’s too important not to. You didn’t see her at the hospital and I did. I think it could be helpful and I’m willing to risk her being mad at both of us.”

And that was how Ashlyn came to be sitting on Mattie’s leather couch between her wife and her best friend Wednesday morning. She was not happy about the ruse to get her to the appointment and had Whitney not been there she would have just refused to go in. But with her best friend there too, she
didn’t have a lot of wiggle room. If both Whitney and Ali thought she needed to talk to Mattie then maybe it was time for her to put her big girl pants on and do it.

“Ashlyn I’m so glad you came in this morning” Mattie started with a warm smile. “I know you probably considered not coming upstairs once you realized what was going on. Thank you for being brave.”

“I’m pretty pissed about the ambush” she gave unfriendly glares to both women next to her. “But I knew it was just a matter of time before we ended up here” she sighed heavily and dropped her eyes to the floor. “May as well get it over with.”

“I’m really worried about you Ash. If I thought you would have come here if we had been honest with you then we would have been honest with you” Whitney explained carefully. “But you haven’t been yourself lately.”

They spent the next fifteen minutes telling Mattie about the frightening events of the morning Ashlyn rushed her wife to the Emergency room and everything that happened afterwards. Once she had all the pertinent facts the therapist asked Ashlyn to talk about what was happening with her.

“Well, um, at first, when we were still in the hospital I just focused on taking care of the baby. She needed to be fed every 2-1/2 hours to help her get over the jaundice and the anemia, well she’s still anemic but she’s getting better every day. Sorry, that part doesn’t really matter right now…” she rambled, nervously bouncing her knee as she sat on the couch.

“And she was taking care of me too, we were in the mother/baby suite again just like with our first baby. And she just did everything she could for me. She walked me around the halls, she helped me in and out of bed and to the bathroom and the only time she wasn’t doing something for me was if I was asleep. Or the first two days I couldn’t go to the NICU so she went down and took care of Josie by herself.”

“That sounds like quite a lot of responsibility” Mattie opined. “Were you happy to stay busy? Were you happy to have so much to do?”

“Yeah, I was” the keeper exhaled. “I was either busy or passed out on the cot” she chuckled. “I was just so happy they were both ok. I would have done anything, gladly.”

“What do you think would have happened if you hadn’t been so busy? Did you ever get a few minutes to just sit still and talk with Ali or Whitney about everything that had happened?”

“No, not really. It was a real whirlwind.”

“I asked her about it a few times but she wouldn’t talk about it” Ali added. “She said she didn’t have time to fall apart then. And I let her get away with it” she looked down at her lap and felt her regret weighing on her.

“It sounds like you were experiencing some denial and it might have been the tail end of some shock from the drive and the surgery. You were coping with some powerful emotions and things the best you could Ashlyn. But that coping mechanism isn’t good for long term health. We need to get you back to center where you won’t feel the need to cope.”

“Oh, is that all?” the keeper smiled and chuckled in an attempt to break the tension that had taken over the room.

“It might not be easy” Mattie agreed with her own smile and a friendly nod of her head. “But it might not be so difficult either. Are you willing to give it a try?”
“Yes, please doc. Help me get past this so I can be with my family and friends again” the blonde pleaded as she leaned forward and rested her elbows on her knees.

“Ok let’s go back to the night it happened. I want to know what you saw and felt and thought that night. You were asleep in bed with your wife. Then what happened?”

“Something woke me up, Ali woke me up but I’m not sure if she touched me or if I just heard her in pain” Ashlyn glanced at her wife and then looked back at Mattie.

Ali started to reach her hand over towards her wife but she saw the therapist discreetly shake her head ‘no’ and pulled it back to her own lap.

“I realized something was wrong because she had never been in that much pain before. She was really pale and sweating and...and she kept moaning and groaning really loudly.”

“Did she say anything to you?”

“I don’t think so, I’m not sure. I guess I don’t remember” she looked at Ali.

“I don’t think I did, it hurt too much and I was having trouble breathing” the brunette added.

“Then what happened?”

“I thought I could rub her back or her legs or something, whatever it was that was hurting her. So I got on my knees to help her roll over. She was trying to roll over but wasn’t getting very far. I...I pulled the covers off of her so I could help her and that’s when I saw it” Ashlyn’s eyes were wide as she went back to that morning in her mind. She swallowed hard as she slowly rubbed her hands up and down her own thighs.

“What did you see Ashlyn?”

“The blood” she gasped out, eyes focused on the floor in front of her as she relived the scariest few hours of her life. “There was so much blood. Something was really wrong and I didn’t know what to do. I felt so helpless and afraid. I knew the ambulance would take too long to get to us so I decided to drive to the hospital myself.”

“Good, you’re doing great Ashlyn” Mattie encouraged. “What did you do next?”

“I ran down the hall and told Deb that I was taking Ali to the hospital and asked her to stay with Drew. I felt awful leaving her behind but there was nothing else I could do so I ran back to Ali and...uh, I picked her up, no I dragged her off the edge of the bed and she tried to stand up but she couldn’t. She looked so scared and I felt so bad for her. I carried as much of her as I could and she helped as much as she could and we made it down the backstairs.”

Whitney was pale as she listened to the story again. It seemed so much more vivid this time, as if Ashlyn was right back there in the big old house this time. She looked past her best friend and saw tears on Ali’s face as she heard her wife tell her story for the very first time. Ashlyn kept going and talked about the harrowing drive and the cop that pulled her over and then helped her get to the hospital even faster. She talked about how sad she was that she hadn’t gotten to say anything to her wife before they whisked her away from her car.

“Why did that bother you so much?”

“Well, I realized that I might not ever see her again. If she...died...then her last memory would have been some panicked drive in the dark and that made me angry. She deserves so much better than
that.”

“What happened when you got inside the hospital?”

“Dr. Comello was there. I don’t know how she knew we were coming in...I never thought about that before right now. Hmm.”

“My mom called her answering service from the house after we left. She told me that” Ali tried to fill in some of the blanks for her distraught wife.

“I had to sign some forms for the insurance and for the surgery. And it was so loud in there and so bright and I couldn’t really understand what anybody was saying. Then, finally, Patty grabbed me and, and shook me to make me snap out of my daze. She wasn’t smiling. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her without a smile, even just a little one.”

“Then what happened? Did you see Ali again before they brought her to surgery?”

“No. Patty said she was already being prepped. And then she asked me which one of them she should save if something went wrong during the operation. She said ‘if something goes wrong and I can’t save them both, what do you want me to do?’”

Mattie’s eyes went wide for a second or two until she composed herself again. “What did you tell her Ashlyn?”

“I...I...I didn’t know what to say. I kept trying to find a different answer to the question but there were only two answers. I didn’t know what to do...”

“What did you say?”

Ashlyn was crying now, still looking straight ahead at a spot on the floor four feet in front of her.

“It’s ok Ash” Ali said softly and put her hand on her keeper’s back, rubbing slow circles there.

“There was no right answer honey. I was wrong. It’s ok. I was so wrong. Keep going with your story.”

Ali was pretty sure she wasn’t supposed to interrupt like that, but she couldn’t help it. She knew what Ashlyn told Dr. Comello and she knew that she had made her keeper feel like shit about it for almost two weeks. She couldn’t let it go on for another minute.

“I told her to save Ali. Then she smiled at me and told me to go wait and she would come and find me after the c-section. But it took so long. They usually only take a half hour and they were in there for a long time. Syd and Whit came and sat with me. Ryan too. He brought bagels” she smiled softly at the memory.

“Ok, skip to when the doctor came to talk to you. What did Dr. Comello say?”

“It wasn’t Patty though. It was another doctor and she told me that Josie was being taken to the NICU and my heart exploded and then stopped. I was so happy that the baby was alive but then I was so scared that she had to go to the NICU. That’s never a good thing. Not ever.”

“And what did the doctor say about Ali?”

“She didn’t say anything at first. I had to ask her twice I think. And all she said was that there had been a complication and they were doing everything they could. No! She said they were trying to control the bleeding and that they might have to do a hysterectomy.” She swallowed hard again and
closed her eyes as a wave of fear swept over her. “I was so scared” her voice was a whisper. “I knew she had lost so much blood and I was so afraid that she wasn’t going to make it. I thought I was going to lose her.” The keeper’s tears flowed freely as she remembered those horrible moments. “I don’t remember what happened after that. Just that we were in the NICU trying to get a picture of Josie so I could show Ali...if she made it out of surgery.”

“The doctor told us we could go down to the NICU and check on Josie” Whitney offered her part of the story. “And they had you fill out some more paperwork and explained how the NICU worked.”

“Right, that’s right” Ashlyn nodded her head slowly. “She was yellow, poor baby. And she didn’t look very happy. She had an oxygen mask on for her lungs and she was so much smaller than Drew was. But she was alive and I couldn’t wait to tell Ali” the keeper smiled.

“When did you finally get to see Ali?”

“She lost so much blood...they had to give her a transfusion. She had to stay in recovery a long time and I couldn’t see her until she was in our room. I think it was close to noontime.”

“And how did you feel when you saw your wife Ashlyn?”

“Oh doc, I don’t think I’ve ever been happier in my whole life. And that includes the day we finally figured out how to say we loved each other.” She grinned so big her dimple appeared and Ali leaned over and hugged her when she saw it.

“Wonderful Ashlyn. Great job” the therapist praised her.

They talked about leaving the hospital and the blood on the seat of her car. Then they talked about life at the big old house and how much trouble Ashlyn had been having sleeping. Ashlyn told her about the fight with Ali over Dr. Comello’s question and all of the events that went on including getting drunk Saturday night and not calling or texting her wife. Then she told the story of how she didn’t want to go home on Sunday but eventually did. She finished with her frenzied attempt to clean the passenger seat Sunday afternoon.

Ali kept rubbing her back and holding her the entire time. She flinched when she heard her wife’s admission about not wanting to go home on Sunday. That hurt more than the brunette thought anything could.

“Can I say something?” Ali asked tentatively. She continued once Mattie nodded at her. “I just want to tell you how incredible you are Ash. I knew something was bothering you but I had no idea how much was bothering you or how serious it was. But, despite all of that, you’ve been right there for all of us, every day. You’ve taken care of Josie and Drew and the dogs and me and, well, I just think you need to know how amazing that is. I told you in the hospital that you were my hero for getting us to the emergency room that night and I meant it. Another ten or fifteen minutes and maybe, maybe things are really different right now.” She paused as that terrifying thought settled around the room. “But I think what you’ve been doing for the past 2-1/2 weeks is just as heroic. I’ve been dealing with a lot of things too and feeling sorry for myself and you even helped me with that. On Sunday, when I was supposed to be helping you, you managed to make me feel good about myself for the first time since that scary night. So when you’re looking at things and judging yourself for some of the things you might have done differently or better, just make sure you remember all those wonderful things you’ve been doing for all of us too.”

“Excellent point Ali” Mattie nodded enthusiastically. “We all need to learn how to see the whole picture instead of just the one or two parts that we’re fixated on.”
Everyone was quiet for a minute and Ashlyn seemed to come back to them and away from the night that haunted her so much.

“So what do you think doc? Can you fix me?” she joked, knowing that Mattie would now give her the spiel about how she’s not broken and doesn’t need fixing. She just needs understanding.

“I know you know better than that Ashlyn” the therapist chuckled. “But I will tell you what I think you’re struggling with if you’re ready to hear my thoughts.”

“Yes, please.”

“Everything stems from the emotional trauma you suffered getting Ali to the hospital and dealing with the unknown and frightening situations while you were waiting for the outcome of her surgery and delivery. Either of those two occurrences could cause you to react the way you have been reacting. You’re displaying some classic symptoms of mild Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, and we have some exercises you can do to help get over that stress and trauma.”

“So I’m just stressed out?”

“That’s an oversimplification of what I just said and you know it. PTSD can be very serious and debilitating if not treated. I want you to take this seriously Ashlyn.”

“I will. I promise, I will.”

“Good. Now do you have any questions for me before we go through the exercises I want you to start doing right away?”

“What was my deal with the car and the blood on the seat?”

“Well, it served two purposes for you, as I see it. It was a reminder of what you almost lost. And it forced you to feel something, even though it was something bad or difficult. The fact is that you’ve been numb to most, if not all, of your feelings since that night and the blood on that seat made you or allowed you to feel. Some subconscious part of you kept going back to it, it was the only way you could feel anything. I believe that’s why you didn’t take care of the situation sooner.”

“So did I totally mess up by getting the car swapped out?” Ali asked.

“Yeah, did I do the wrong thing by taking it to get cleaned?” Whitney added curiously.

“Yes, and no ladies. I think if you had done either of those things earlier, then maybe it would have been problematic for Ashlyn. But she had enough time with it so that it served its’ purpose. I think you did the right thing, both of you.”

“Whew” Whitney exhaled and exchanged a relieved look with the brunette.

“Who cleaned up all the blood in our bed?” Ashlyn asked, the question just popping into her head for the very first time.

“It must have been my mom” Ali answered, surprised that she hadn’t thought about that yet herself either.

“Well we need a new mattress then. There’s no way that much blood didn’t stain it. And we need to buy your mother something incredible to thank her for everything” the keeper commented and looked at her wife.
“I agree with both of those statements wholeheartedly” Ali smiled softly. “And your bestie needs something nice too.”

“How long will she be in treatment for her mild PTSD?” Whitney asked with concern in her voice.

“Sometimes it takes a couple of months, sometimes up to six months. But in your case Ashlyn, I think you’ll be feeling better in a few weeks. You’re strong and smart and once we start doing the exercises and talking through your story some more I feel confident that you’ll be back to your old self in no time.” She smiled at the three women on the couch. “I’d like to see you at least once a week, twice if you can make it work. The more we do the faster it goes. But it’s not a race and you don’t need to feel pressured…”

“Hell, I’ll come three times a week if it’ll make a difference doc.”

Ali took her phone out so she could schedule an appointment of her own with the therapist and before they left the office that day they had the next month scheduled out with Ashlyn coming twice a week and Ali coming twice a month.

“No sessions for you Whitney?” Mattie teased the quiet blonde as they walked to the outer office after the appointment.

“No thank you” she smiled back. “But if I ever do need one I know where to come.”

After they had both thanked, hugged and said goodbye to Whitney, Ali and Ashlyn got into the truck and sat still for a few minutes. There was a lot to take in and absorb and process and they both knew it would take a few days for that to happen.

“ASH, I’M SO SORRY HONEY” Ali started tearfully as she reached for her wife and pulled her into a hug across the center console. She didn’t care that her incision and abdomen hurt like hell. She needed to hold her keeper close. “I was so caught up in my own crap that I didn’t see how much you were hurting. I’m so sorry.”

“We both had stuff messing with our heads and it made it really hard to hear each other. We did the best we could, which wasn’t great” she chuckled and rolled her eyes. “But I feel really good about where we are now. And I promise I’ll get better baby. I promise.”

“I promise too Ash. Thank you for finally telling me what happened to you that night. I heard Sydney’s story so I knew some of it, but Jesus, I’m just blown away by your strength. I always have been. Thank you for being so strong for all of us.”

“I’m two steps away from a stint in the looney bin and you’re telling me how strong I am” Ashlyn smiled softly at her wife as they pulled apart but kept their hands together. “If I was really strong I wouldn’t have waited 2-1/2 weeks to get help from Mattie. I owe you all the thanks for getting me here today. I was afraid. Not very glamorous or attractive, but true.”

“And I’m sorry I said you made the wrong decision in the ER. That was just stupid of me and I think I just felt like I didn’t have any control over anything and I decided that was the thing I was going to have control over. I hate that about myself. I’m sorry honey.”

“So you don’t think I made the wrong choice?”

“I think you made the right choice for you in that moment.” Ali looked right into her wife’s nervous hazel eyes so she could see just how serious and sincere she was on this subject. “And anything other than that is a stupid thing to say or even think. I’m so sorry I told you it was the wrong choice Ash. I’ll regret that until my last breath. I’m so sorry” she squeezed her wife’s hands even tighter. “I
don’t know what I would have done in your place. I honestly don’t. And hopefully” she knocked her head, “I never ever have to.”

She pulled the blonde towards her and pressed a soft kiss to her lips. It was one of the few times they had kissed since Josie had been born and it felt wonderful. They smiled shyly at each other for a minute and then sat back in their seats as Ashlyn started the drive home.

“And I know you love our daughter and whatever dumb thing I said about you not valuing her was just me being a bitchy, hysterical, miserable person. Can you forgive me?”

“Of course I forgive you Al, just like you forgive me for not telling you how messed up I was. If I had told you any of the times you asked me about it you never would have jumped on me about the right or wrong choice. I’m just as much to blame for that stupid fight.”

“Let’s just keep talking ok? It’s going to be harder than ever because we have two kids and even less time, but I promise I’ll make time for it.”

“Me too baby. I’ve always said we make the best team and it’s still true.”

“I love you so much Ashlyn.”

“I love you too.”
It was hard for Ashlyn to leave for her away game a couple of hours after she and Ali finished their gut-wrenching therapy appointment. As was always the case when they left Mattie’s office, they felt unusually close to one another and wanted nothing more than to snuggle up together for the rest of the day. Instead, they called and talked Whitney into turning around and joining them for an early lunch with Drew after picking him up from daycare. There wasn’t time to do anything other than eat and laugh with the cute toddler but that was the perfect remedy for the barrage of emotions the three women had just endured together. Lunch with Drew lifted their spirits and made them all feel more normal.

“I’m proud of you Ash” Whitney smiled at her best friend across the table as they both watched Ali leading Drew by the hand to the bathroom.

“Thanks Whit” Ashlyn looked embarrassed as she turned her attention to the law student. “But I was too chicken to get help on my own. I’m an idiot and I can’t thank you enough for pushing me. Again.”

“I’m still proud of you. I’m mad at you for being so stubborn. But I know you’ll get your head right and that’s going to take time and hard work and if you need me for anything, all you have to do is call me and I’ll be right there. You know that right?”

“Yeah. Just like always. Someday I’m going to be there for you my friend. Someday” the keeper smiled sheepishly.

“I’m counting on it.”

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It was a rough match. The Breakers lost 2-0 and didn’t look very good at all. Ashlyn had been rusty and a little out of sync when the game started but she had pulled herself into form after about 20 minutes. They had gone in at halftime down 1-0 and the coach had given them two adjustments to make for the second half. From where Ashlyn stood, it didn’t look like anybody had been paying attention to the coach. What was worse was the way many of the younger players nonchalantly handled the loss once they were back in the locker room. As usual, Ashlyn was one of the very last players signing autographs and taking pictures with the fans. When she walked into the locker room with Kristie Mewis and Julie King just ahead of her the keeper couldn’t believe her eyes. They had lost a soccer game so she didn’t expect them to behave as if their dog had just died or anything. But she certainly didn’t expect them to be playing around like high school kids without a care in the world. Ashlyn saw Angela Salem and Tasha Dowie and Rose Lavelle and Rosie White quietly going about their business while the group of youngsters carried on around them. They were having so much fun dancing and goofing around that they didn’t even see the team leaders enter the room. The keeper saw Julie King’s shoulders slump just a bit as she took in the scene as well.

“I got this cap” Ashlyn said to the back of Julie and Kristie.
She let them get further into the room before she yelled.

“Oh yeah!!! Let’s party!!!” she grabbed the towel off of a teammate’s shoulder and swung it above her head as she whooped it up and danced her way over to the five or six younger players who were pissing her off.

Everybody froze when they saw what was happening. Angela Salem smirked and lowered her head until she could get control of her face again. The younger players looked at each other nervously and one of them even laughed along with the keeper, not understanding that something was wrong.

“Yeah, that’s right Suze, laugh it up!!” Ashlyn teased with a big, fake grin.

One by one they realized their keeper was messing with them. They shut the music off and stood awkwardly around their lockers in various states of undress.

“What? No more dancing?” Ashlyn shrugged her shoulders and looked surprised. “No more music? What’s the matter guys? Why did you stop the celebration?” she looked around the room and shrugged again. She was trying to control the fury inside of her so she had a chance of keeping her rant at least mostly productive instead of just mean. “Oh, that’s right” she grinned like an idiot and hit herself in the head with the heel of her palm. “We didn’t win! We got our asses handed to us and never played well enough to even make them nervous. My bad” she shook her head and looked from player to player as she slowly paced around the room. “What are you thinking about right now Tris?” she focused on one of the younger players.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing huh? Well I’m thinking about how you can’t complete a pass in the midfield that’s longer than my arm.” She kept moving. “What about you Duff? Nothing? I’m wondering if you didn’t hear coach at halftime or if you just decided you were better than the rest of us and didn’t need to do what he asked us all to do in the second half.” She stepped closer to the talented rookie who had all the potential in the world and none of the self-discipline. “Which is it Duff? I know the answer but I’d really like to hear you say it out loud to the rest of us.” The rookie dropped her eyes to the floor but clenched her jaw. Ashlyn moved on. “What about you Midge?”

“I’m mad because I was offsides twice.”

“Oh, that’s better. But, for the record, you were on the first time and everybody could see it” she smiled at the 5th year player who knew better than these younger fools. “Rose? What about you?” she stood in front of Rose Lavelle and folded her arms across her chest.

“I want that second corner kick back. Kristie had her man beat and if my ball had been a little better she would have put it away and we could have gone in 1-1 at the half.”

“Good.” Ashlyn looked around the room again. “For me, I want the whole first twenty minutes back because I played like shit and if Julie and Megan hadn’t saved my ass we’d have been down 3-0 at the half.”

“But it’s your first game back Keep, you settled in after that and played great” Angela offered up, knowing exactly what Ashlyn was trying to do.

“That doesn’t matter Ang! No excuses on this team! Not for any of us! I don’t care who you are or how long you’ve been on this team or how well you usually play or anything. There’s not one person in this room who couldn’t have done at least three things better on that pitch tonight. I could probably say five or even ten, but I’ll stick with three for now. That’s what you should be thinking
about right now. ‘What could I have done better to help my team win?’ We’re not in high school anymore. This is a professional team with very high standards and we’re not living up to those right now and I’m tired of it. We won the Supporters Shield and the fucking Championship last season and you’re telling me we can’t be better than 8-8-1 right now?! You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me!!’

Ashlyn was yelling at this point as she kept slowly pacing around the room. She dished it out to everybody equitably and tried not to focus too much on those younger players that had pissed her off so badly when she walked into the room.

“We have nine games left this season. Nine. Now I don’t know if we can catch Chicago or LA, but we have to move up the table and get that fourth spot. That’s our mission. Make the playoffs. I know we can do it. I don’t have a doubt in my mind that we can do it. But we’ve gotta play better soccer! Every single one of us has to be better. What we’re doing now? It’s not good enough. Not nearly good enough and I will hound you until you fear me in your dreams to make you better.”

“Yeah Keep!”

“We don’t celebrate and dance around the locker room after we get embarrassed on the pitch. We don’t half-ass our passes and then drag our feet after we turn the ball over. We play smart and we play hard and we play proud and, most importantly, we play together!!”

The players were starting to get behind Ashlyn’s pep talk and cheering or clapping as she spoke.

“We all have to be thinking about what we can do to make this team better. We need better commitment in trainings. And goddamit, when coach or cap tells you what to do you’d better fucking do it or you’ll have me to deal with! And I won’t be this warm and fuzzy next time either.”

She kept moving around the room as many of the players stood up and started to close in around her. “It only takes one of us to fuck everything up. We could knock the ball around beautifully and complete five or six nice passes in a row but if that seventh pass is too short or too long, or if Duff or Tash or Midge is offsides, then none of that matters. It was all wasted. Don’t be the reason the play doesn’t work. Do your part so you’re not letting the rest of us down. That’s what being a team is all about and I expect every one of us to be a better teammate. Do I make myself clear?”

Another chorus of affirmative shouts and cheers answered Ashlyn back. The younger players still looked a little hesitant and Duff was still sporting the same sour look on her face from the beginning of the keeper’s rant.

“Bring it in!” Captain King shouted and they all huddled up around Ashlyn.

“We’ve got a break and I want you to go and enjoy it. Take some time off and relax. Make sure you don’t go crazy though. Stay fit or we won’t stand a chance when we come back. And when we come back we’re going to be a better team. We’re going to focus 100% on winning those last nine games. If you can’t do that then you’d better tell us right now so we can start changing the line-ups and strategies. Tell us right now if you can’t be a better teammate so we don’t waste any more time on you.” She looked at the faces around her and saw the desire that had been missing all throughout the game. “Suze, are you in?”

“Yes Keep!”

“What about you Tris?”

“I’m in Keep!”
“Duff?”
“I’m in.”

“I’m in.”

“Midge, you in too?”

“Yeah keep!”

“Rose?”

“Hell yeah Keep!”

“Ang?”

“You know it Keep!”

She called on each player in that room and they all chimed in.

“We’re all in and we’re going to fucking make the playoffs!! Am I right??!”

“Fuck yeah Keep!!!!!”

Ashlyn came home Friday afternoon and went right to another appointment with Mattie. It had only been three days since the big session with Ali and Whitney and nothing much had changed for the keeper, except that her wife and best friend finally knew what had been eating her alive for the past four weeks. She knew she wasn’t going to be instantly cured, but she had naively hoped she might be able to sleep again. It wasn’t until her second appointment of the following week that she was able to report to her therapist that she had slept through the night since their previous meeting earlier in the week. The keeper was off until her game in Atlanta on August 7th and she and Ali had both cancelled any extra things they had scheduled for the three-week FIFA break for the EUROs. Their only goal was to relax as much as possible, take care of their children, and try to find their way back to each other after their bumpy beginning of July.

Ali still wasn’t cleared for much of anything. She could still only lift Josie, per doctor’s orders. Her six-week postpartum check-up was coming up on August 3rd and she was eager to get to that milestone so she could resume her more normal activities. She also wanted to have sex with her wife again. She wasn’t quite as nervous as she had been after her first pregnancy, but that was only because Josie hadn’t stretched out and bruised up her vagina. Ali knew that part would be ok. But she was nervous that her abdomen would hurt when she had an orgasm. And she was pretty terrified of the uterine contraction that she would feel when she finally came. Because of the surgical repair to the tear in her uterus, all of the uterine contractions she had experienced since the c-section, as her uterus changed shape and moved back where it belonged, had been very painful. They were much worse than after Drew, so she assumed the orgasm she would have would be more painful too. The good news was that because she wasn’t breastfeeding Josie she didn’t have to worry about extra dryness. She could expect to get just as wet as she ever did with her sexy keeper. The other nice thing about not breastfeeding was that she didn’t feel like such a feedbag. Josie didn’t cling to her like Drew had, and as much as Ali missed that special time with her daughter, she had to admit that it was nice not to have sore breasts and nipples all the time. Part of the work she had started with Mattie on her own was to help her get over her feelings of inadequacy and incompetence about not being able to breastfeed Josie. Ali, on her worst days, blamed herself entirely and completely for their predicament. Mattie challenged her to come up with some positives about not breastfeeding and the brunette was doing well with it so far.
The first week Ashlyn was home had been a little awkward still. She and Ali weren’t angry with each other anymore but they were still feeling shy and timid and careful around each other. Mattie suggested to Ashlyn that they try napping together when Drew went down for his afternoon nap, assuming that Deb was ok to watch Josie, of course. They both needed the sleep and it was a nice, safe, comfortable way back towards intimacy. Drew was 26 months old and on a one nap a day schedule. He napped from 12:30 to 3:30pm every day. Josie needed to be fed at 1pm and would then almost always go down for a shorter nap of her own. So Ali, Ashlyn and Deb agreed to give the new therapy ‘homework’ a try. They didn’t have to sleep for three hours if they couldn’t or didn’t want to, but Mattie wanted them to stay in or on their bed for that time. They could read or do whatever they wanted as long as they were both on the bed together.

They had also begun alternating the night feedings so Ali would get up for the 1am and 4am feedings one night and then Ashlyn would do it the next night. Even if Ashlyn couldn’t sleep she wasn’t supposed to take over the night feedings on Ali’s night. Finally, halfway through that first week off, Ashlyn slept all the way through the night in her own bed. There had been no horrible nightmare or stressful anxiety. The keeper was convinced that the new mattress set they bought contributed to her success as well. It might have all been in her head, but it worked, regardless, and she was relieved as hell.

The first few times they napped together that first week had been awkwardly sweet. They kept their casual shorts and t-shirt or loose pants and t-shirt on to nap in and they slept on top of the covers. Ali took her bra off because she had always hated sleeping in one. The brunette was still recovering and her incision and belly were still painful, but not nearly as bad as it had been four weeks before. When she sneezed before, the pain in her abdomen was at an 11. By the end of July the pain when she sneezed was down to about a 6 or 7 depending on the sneeze. Ashlyn was afraid of hurting her wife by squeezing her too hard or holding her too tightly in her sleep. Just to be safe, the keeper asked Ali to spoon her from behind and put a pillow between them in case Ashlyn backed up into her or something in her sleep. Ali knew the blonde was being ridiculously over-protective but she also knew that Ashlyn was trying to work through her nightmare problem and that if she could do anything to keep her sleep experience stress-free, she would gladly do it. By the end of that first week they were feeling comfortable with each other again, even with the extra energy of Ashlyn’s mild PTSD and Ali’s discomfort with her postpartum body present in the room with them. They started and ended each naptime with a kiss and even those got better and better every day.

It wasn’t until the very end of that first week off that anything besides napping happened in their bed. Ali, the big spoon, woke up to quiet whining and soft moaning coming from her wife and immediately got nervous. Mattie had told her not to try and wake Ashlyn up if she was having a nightmare. All the experts agreed that it was best to just let the nightmare, hopefully, pass and there was a good chance that Ashlyn wouldn’t even remember having the nightmare once she woke up on her own. The brunette listened intently to her wife’s breathing and the whines and moans she was making. She carefully propped herself up on her elbow so she could see Ashlyn’s face better. It was beautiful and looked calm and relaxed. Nothing about this seemed nightmarish at all. After another minute of observation, she saw a familiar flush covering Ashlyn’s neck and moving up towards her face. Ali’s eyes went wide as she realized her keeper was having a sex dream.

The brunette took a deep breath and settled herself down because she wasn’t supposed to have sex for almost another two weeks. But she couldn’t help her body responding to Ashlyn’s. She felt her own cheeks get hot and, after a particularly loud moan from her wife, her own passion pool between her legs. It was the first sexual response she’d had since Josie was born and it made her both nervous and excited. Ali pulled the pillow out from between them and ran her hand down Ashlyn’s side, all the way to her ass and onto the side of her thigh. When her hand touched the warm skin of her exposed thigh Ali sucked in a breath and closed her eyes. She moved her hand to the back of Ashlyn’s thigh and pulled it back up towards her ass, sliding around the sensual curve and coming
back up to her hip. Fuck. Ali repeated the movement of her hand but this time when she brought it up the back of Ashlyn’s thigh she pulled it gently over her center and moaned herself when she felt the heat there beneath the blonde’s shorts. Ashlyn rolled over onto her back, still asleep but obviously responding to Ali’s touch. She moved her left arm up above her head and kept her right arm down by her side. The brunette moved her hand up across her wife’s taut abs, still hidden beneath her t-shirt. She pressed a warm kiss to the inside of Ashlyn’s arm that was bent up above her head. Fuck, her skin felt so soft and warm and inviting. Ali’s hand moved up between her keeper’s breasts, over her t-shirt, and gently swirled around her chest for a minute before settling on top of her left breast. Her nipple was almost hard and it made Ali moan again. She trailed her hand over to Ashlyn’s right breast and dragged her fingertips around the nipple there before finally palming it and rubbing back and forth across the stiffening nub. God damn that felt good. Before she even knew what she was doing, Ali brought her mouth down onto her wife’s left breast, still covered by sports bra and t-shirt, and blew hot air through both pieces of clothing and onto her nipple. She nudged it with the tip of her nose while still palming the other one. Ashlyn moaned again and her mouth dropped open as her breathing increased.

Ali was turned on and when she moved her left hand down across her keeper’s mound and cupped her center through her shorts she groaned out loud and closed her eyes. She could feel the heat radiating from Ashlyn’s hot core and all she wanted to do was taste her wife’s passion for the first time in five weeks. It didn’t take her long to make her decision. She grabbed the pillow she had just discarded and pulled it with her so she could lie on top of it once she settled in between Ashlyn’s legs. Ali gently pushed her keeper’s left leg up and out to the side and then raked her fingertips across her mound.

“Al, what are you doing?” Ashlyn’s raspy, sleepy voice travelled down to where her wife was desperately trying to control herself.

“It’s ok babe, I just need to taste you. Can I taste you, please?”

Ashlyn, still half-asleep, felt her core twitch when she heard the desperation in her wife’s voice. She lifted her head up and focused her eyes down between her legs. She saw the pillow and then she saw the look on her hungry brunette’s face. Ashlyn felt the juices in her core start to slip lower and she wordlessly lifted her hips and pushed her shorts and underwear down. Ali grabbed them and finished pulling them all the way down her long, lithe and muscular legs.

“Fuck, you smell so good Ashlyn...”

Ali placed soft kisses all around her keeper’s mound and the tops of her thighs. She looked up and saw Ashlyn start to play with her own breasts, slowly, her head propped up on an extra pillow so she could watch her brunette work.

“I was dreaming about fucking you and making you come. Maybe I’m still dreaming now...”

The scent of her keeper filled her senses and she couldn’t wait any more. Ali gave her a long, broad lick with her tongue from the bottom of her entrance right up to her clit.

“Mmmmm, yeah, feels good...”

“Mmmmmmm” Ali hummed and moaned loudly. “You taste so good.”

She used her hand to spread Ashlyn’s pussy lips farther apart and then dove in with her hot tongue. Ashlyn bent both her knees up and opened herself as much as she could for her hungry wife. She loved the way her tongue could be so soft and then so fucking strong the next second. The keeper reflexively closed her eyes when Ali swirled her tongue through her wet folds in a figure eight
pattern. She reached down with one hand and put it behind Ali’s head, holding her face against her entrance with a little bit of pressure.

“Oh Jesus. Fuck, you feel good baby.”

Ashlyn was grinding her soaking wet pussy against Ali’s face and moaning loudly as she felt her wife’s tongue start thrusting inside her center. The keeper was incredibly wet and must have been having quite the dream. She would probably need a new pair of panties when she went to get dressed after their nap.

“Mmmmmmm” the brunette hummed into her wife’s pussy and pressed her face in even deeper.

“Oh my God, yes!”

Ali felt the blonde’s walls starting to constrict and push against her tongue as it kept thrusting and swirling and exploring. She knew her girl was close to her release. The brunette slid her fingers through Ashlyn’s wet folds and then started rubbing her clit with a medium pressure and pace. She kept moaning and humming into her wife’s core, knowing the vibrations would drive her wild.

“Just a little more, I’m so close” Ashlyn panted out.

Ali’s fingers rubbed faster and harder against her clit and she thrusted her talented tongue up towards Ashlyn’s g-spot. It only took a few strong strokes and some more strong rubbing of her clit to push her over the edge.

“Aliiii!!” she yelled out as she came hard and then quickly put her forearm over her mouth to keep herself quiet.

Ashlyn convulsed and then shook all over as the orgasm raced through her body. She kept her hand pressed to the back of Ali’s head, holding her in place for the first few minutes of her release. The keeper finally let her go as she dropped her head back against the pillows and started panting to catch her breath. For some reason that made the brunette happy. Maybe because it was usually she who was caught not as neatly trimmed and groomed as she wanted to be. Maybe because it was the brunette who felt more imperfect than usual those days and it was reassuring to find that her gorgeous wife wasn’t always perfect either. All Ali knew was that she was happier in that moment, with her face in her wife’s delicious pussy, than she had been in a long time.

“Come up here baby” Ashlyn purred, contentedly.

“I’ll be there in a minute beautiful” she replied with a smirk and a wink as she sucked the last of Ashlyn’s passion from the inside of her thigh.

She took a minute and ran her hands up and down each of Ashlyn’s long legs, reacquainting herself with the tattoos she knew by heart but hadn’t spent much time with lately. She would have spent longer but her belly was killing her and she had to get off of her hands and knees. When she finally made her way back up the bed, dragging her pillow with her and pressing it between their bodies, Ali gave her wife one of the most passionate kisses she had ever given. She felt the tug in her core and the electricity under her skin.

“Eleven days babe” she breathed out as she settled into her usual spot under Ashlyn’s left arm. She was frustrated and horny, but mostly just happy to be so close again to the love of her life. “Eleven days.”
The second week Ashlyn had off was the last week of July. She and Ali were more comfortable with each other and, most importantly, the keeper was starting to sleep at night again. It was a pretty good week and they were starting to get into a rhythm with both kids and both dogs and the living saint whose name was Debbie Christopher. It wasn’t close to perfect, by any means, and they were still careful around each other. It seemed silly sometimes, but they both knew that the other was dealing with emotions and feelings that had almost wrecked them once already. They were going to give each other space to work on those things, because it did take work. They couldn’t just cry in Mattie’s office one time and then make everything peachy keen again. They were both hurting for different, very valid reasons. And they had hurt each other from their own dark places – Ashlyn by not being honest with her wife and Ali by causing the fight about Ashlyn’s instructions to Dr. Comello. They took their time and the space they needed, but they checked in with each other now. One would always go to the other and give her a hug or a kiss or a caress just to make sure they remembered they were doing this together. And it was working.

Wednesday was Ali’s 37th birthday and Deb tried to get them to go out but they wouldn’t. They joked about staying in the big old house for as long as possible and just pretending the rest of the world didn’t exist. Instead, Ali’s closest family and friends brought take-out and birthday cake to the birthday girl that afternoon and evening. It wasn’t fancy or organized. It was relaxed and casual and easy – just what was called for that week – and Ali loved it.

Ashlyn met with Mattie twice that week and kept doing the exercises to help process and deal with the trauma she had experienced the night she drove her wife to the hospital. She had one nightmare that week and Mattie asked her to tell her about it during their second meeting that week.

“It’s pretty much the same as always” she spoke in a quiet voice as she tried to keep her heartbeat at a normal rhythm and her breathing even. “Sometimes we end up in a different location but that’s about all that changes.”

“So you wake up in bed and Ali’s covered in blood and you’re afraid she’s lost the baby” the therapist replied calmly. “Is that right?”

“Yeah, um, then we’re in the car, I don’t know how we got there, we were just there” she looked at Mattie with apologetic eyes, as if she had done something wrong. When the therapist smiled and nodded at her she continued after taking a deep breath. “And Ali’s crying and holding onto her baby bump and just crying and wailing. She keeps saying ‘I lost the baby Ash, I lost our baby girl, she’s gone’ over and over and I’m trying to calm her down but I can’t reach her, I can’t touch her.” Ashlyn fights the fear and anguish in her mind and swallows hard. “And it’s so dark and I don’t know where I’m going. I...I can’t see anything and I don’t know where the road is and then it’s a snowstorm and it’s like a whiteout so I can’t even see the front of the car anymore and I’m trying to drive fast but we’re barely moving and I can feel the panic starting to take over. Then, all of a sudden, I realize that Ali’s not crying anymore! She’s not making any sound at all and I still can’t reach her. She’s curled up and facing the other way so I can’t even see her face. I’m yelling her name and telling her to wake up but she doesn’t.” The keeper had tears in her eyes as she relived the dream in Mattie’s office that morning. “I stop the car and get out and it’s freezing cold and there’s snow everywhere and the trees look like they’re covered in crystals and the moon is big and full so everything’s sparkling in the swirling snow. I move as fast as I can to her side of the car and pull the door open. And...and...fuck...”

“It’s ok Ashlyn, you’re doing fine” Mattie’s calm voice reached her from across the room. “It’s not real. Remember it’s just a dream and Ali is safe at home with your baby girl.”

Ashlyn closed her eyes for a minute and took a couple of deep breaths.
“Right. It’s just a dream...”

“Now take me back to the dream and tell me what happens when you open the door.”

“Blood, all this blood, Ali’s blood, comes pouring out of the car, like a river. And it’s rushing past me and it’s up to my knees and it’s warm and, oh God, there’s so much blood. And it just keeps coming, this river of blood, and...and there’s a baby in it and it floats past me and I try to grab it but the current is too fast and it carries her away. And then I yell ‘No!!’ and I turn to try and grab the baby, even though I know there’s no way to reach her anymore. And that’s when I feel Ali’s body bump into me from behind. The blood is carrying her away too and I yell her name and I do everything I can to grab her and hold her but I can’t move my legs anymore. They’re stuck and won’t move no matter how hard I try. And I have one of her arms and I’m holding on and her body just spins in the current and the blood makes it slippery and hard to hold and she’s slipping...she’s slipping right through my hands and I’m crying and screaming as the last part of her hand finally gets pulled out of mine. The current pulls her away, just like the baby, and I scream ‘Aliii no!!!’”
August would be a month that would either make or break their whole summer. As they looked at it on the calendar both Ali and Ashlyn were thinking it would break them but, as always, hoped for the best. Kyle and Nathan’s wedding was coming up on Saturday August 14th. They drove up to Boston on Sunday August 1st with Luna and enough luggage to sink a ship. Both men had taken the whole month off from work to relax and get ready for their wedding and then enjoy their two-week honeymoon before re-joining the real world at the beginning of September. They were staying at Nathan’s parents’ house in Ipswich for the first week and then at Ken and Vicki’s for the second week. But they seemed to end up at the big old house more often than not. Part of the allure was the new baby, of course, but the older Ali and Kyle got the more they appreciated the time they got to spend together. And big brother Kyle had been devastated when he heard about Ali’s second near-death experience in her young lifetime. He had been working on his final project for the semester at film school and didn’t get any of the first wave of calls and texts from his parents and Sydney. He had been locked in an editing room where they had a strict rule about no cellphones. Nathan finally had to come and interrupt him just to give him the news, and by that time it was good news. Ali had to tell her brother herself, in no uncertain terms and loudly, not to come up to Boston. She made him promise to stay in NYC and finish his semester strong. It wasn’t until both Deb and Ken told him the same thing that he agreed not to come up. When he finally saw his sister that Sunday afternoon he hugged and held her for so long as they greeted each other in the mudroom that Deb had to tell him to let her sit down.

“She’s still sore from surgery Kyle, let her sit” Deb chastised with a loving smile and a squeeze of his arm. “She doesn’t move very fast yet so she won’t get away” she giggled and grinned at her two children, proud of the way they loved each other so much.

Later that afternoon, after both Nathan and Kyle had held and fed their baby niece and the dogs had gotten over the excitement of having their favorite dog cousin Luna for a visit, Ali and Kyle sat in the backyard and talked. Kyle arranged one of the lounge chairs so it was in the shade and then sat at the foot of it, tossing a ball for all three dogs to chase. Ali sat in the chair too, one leg bent up in front of her, half cross legged, and the other stretched out behind her brother.

“You know you can stay here” she said softly, watching Persey get to the ball first, again. “You’d have to take the pull-out up in my office, but you’re more than welcome.”

“I know, and I’d love to” he admitted with a shy glance. “I hate not staying here with you guys.”

“So what’s the deal then?” she gave him a puzzled look and watched him throw the ball again.

“Oh, you know” he sighed. “People get their feelings hurt” he rolled his eyes and chuckled.

“Like who?” Ali’s eyebrows lifted and she shot a quick glance at the house before poking her brother in the side with her foot. “Spill it.”

“It’s nothing specific” he laughed. “It was just pointed out that we spend a lot of time here with you
guys when we visit.”

“So what? Who has a problem with that?”

“Nate wouldn’t say, but obviously one of his parents feels neglected so we’re trying to make a point to stay there more often when we visit.”

Ali could tell how much her brother loved his fiancé in that very moment. There wasn’t another person on the planet he would do something like that for. She also knew that Kyle really loved Nate’s parents. That wasn’t new. Instead of being upset by not getting to spend more time with her brother she decided to appreciate the fact that the Kimballs loved Kyle and Nathan so much that they felt bad when they didn’t get to see them.

“That’s a surprisingly mature decision BB” she teased but then smiled warmly at him.

“It’s tough being popular” he joked and struck a pose as they both laughed. “Normally it’s not a big deal, but when you already have a full house and we sleep on a pull-out instead of a nice, comfy bed at somebody else’s house, well, it just looks bad.”

“Fair enough” she nodded and grinned.

They spent a few quiet minutes watching the dogs play and chew and be adorable getting in and out of the kiddie pool. It was almost 5pm and it was still pretty hot out. There was a little bit of a breeze though so it wasn’t too bad. Kyle and Nathan would be staying for dinner and then driving up to Ipswich to stay at the Kimball’s house.

“So, are you doing ok?” Kyle’s voice was low and quiet as he turned to look at his sister.

“Yeah, I have my six-week appointment on Tuesday and I should get the ok to start working out and doing my normal routine again.” She saw the way he was studying her as she spoke and knew that wasn’t what he meant.

“And my incision is healing nicely. Hopefully the scar won’t be too noticeable, but even if it is, it’ll be lower than most of the bikini bottoms I wear anyway” she shrugged her shoulders and felt the weight of his stare.

“That’s great” he smiled and patted her leg. “But that’s not what I mean.” He waited for a few seconds but when she didn’t offer anything else he continued.

“How are you...with the whole delivery thing?”

“If you mean how am I with the whole almost dying thing then I don’t know” she shrugged again and looked down at her lap. “I woke up and heard some pretty scary things but I don’t remember much after getting in the car.”

“Al, I...I...” he started to speak as his face scrunched up and tears started to slip past his cheeks.

“Ky, listen to me” she sat up and took his hand and squeezed it hard. “I’m fine. I’m perfectly ok. I promise.”

“I know, but...”

“I don’t want to hear whatever you’ve been torturing yourself with all these weeks. That’s all in your head.” She leaned against the back of the chair again and shook her head from side to side. “Something really scary happened and it’s over and everything’s ok. There wasn’t anything you could have done, or should have done. So don’t go feeling all guilty or whatever because you
weren’t here or something crazy like that.”

Her words sounded harsh but she knew her brother. She could tell he had been beating himself up just from the times they had spoken on the phone about this sensitive issue. He would always feel guilty for not being there for her back in college when she almost died and they had no way of getting in touch with him because he was strung out and off the grid. She had forgiven him for that years ago and it was behind them. And this situation really had nothing to do with that anyway.

“I should have come up and seen you before now” he whispered as he wiped his tears away with his free hand. “I’m feeling guilty about that. Sorry.”

“But I told you not to come...”

“But I still should have come” he sat up straighter and gave her a sad smile. “You would have come if it were me.”

She couldn’t disagree with him, but that was a silly game to try and play. Ali had learned the hard way that you really didn’t know what you would do until it actually happened to you. Ashlyn had taught her that one at great cost just a couple of weeks ago in their therapist’s office.

“You don’t know that, first of all. And, second of all, you’re here. You’re here checking on me right now. It hasn’t even been six weeks yet BB” she sighed and cocked her head at him. “If you need me to tell you in person that you did the right thing by staying and finishing your final project and finishing your semester strong then I’m happy to do it. You did the right thing. You did exactly what I asked you to do and I can’t thank you enough. I would have felt awful if you rushed up here to watch me sleep and messed up your shot at film school. Believe me. You absolutely did the right thing.”

It took a few minutes of thinking and processing and watching the goofy dogs before a half-smile crept across his face.

“Thank you” he patted his sister’s leg.

“Me? For what?”

“For taking the time to make me feel better about your bad experience.” He rolled his eyes and chuckled. “I hate when people do that and I just totally did it to you.”

“Yeah, well, you’re welcome” she chuckled with him and then smiled at him when he looked up again. “Besides, this was not a happy place to be for a while there” she shook her head. “Trust me when I tell you, you did the right thing.”

Ali had talked with her brother several times about her fight with Ashlyn and the fallout from it. He knew the whole story and, even though he didn’t agree with his sister’s side of things when it came to the fight, he still stuck by her side, even more so than Sydney had.

“And that all seems good now too. Right?” he quirked an eyebrow at her.

“Yeah, we’re good” she answered quietly and looked down.

“But, what?” he prompted, knowing there was something his sister hadn’t told even him yet.

“It’s nothing really” she began and cautiously looked at the house. “I’m not mad about it anymore, not now that I understand what she went through that night. And it was a stupid thing to fight about it the first place...”
“But what? Come on, spit it out” he shook her leg and gave her a serious face.

“I still think about the doctor asking her that question” she replied quietly and slowly, and then rapidly spit out the next few sentences to try and explain herself as her brother’s shocked face spurred her on. “I’m not judging her for it, I swear. She was in a terrible position and she made the best decision she could and I swear to God I’m ok with it. But I don’t think I would have made the same decision. And, sometimes, I wonder if that means I don’t love her as much as she loves me or something stupid like that.”

By the time she was done her voice was so quiet he could barely hear her and she had somehow physically gotten smaller as she sat there in the chair. It was as if she had shrunken under the weight of the admission.

“Listen sis” Kyle leaned towards her and took both of her hands in his as he spoke. “Don’t worry about any of that stuff, ok? That’s stuff that nobody should ever have to think about. You guys had to deal with it and that sucks. But you did it and it’s behind you. Don’t dwell on it. Don’t live there. Don’t spend any more time on it than you already have. Of course you love her just as much as she loves you. That’s impossible to prove, but it’s just as impossible to disprove.” He quirked an eyebrow and emphasized ‘disprove’ to make sure he was making his point. “I can tell you from where I sit, and I’ve had a pretty good seat for the Ali and Ashlyn lovebirds show, that you guys have something really rare and special. Don’t demean it by going down this dark path. Nothing good’s going to come from it. Just, don’t do it.”

“You’re right, I know” she agreed sheepishly. “I just can’t stop my mind from wandering there sometimes. I know it’ll pass soon enough and I won’t think about it anymore. I haven’t said anything to anybody else, and I won’t” she looked at him conspiratorially. “Maybe just saying the words out loud to you will make it go away. Ash always says if you’re worried about something that if you talk about it and just put the words out there that sometimes that’s all you need to feel better about it.”

“Oh come on” Kyle groaned. “She can’t be that good at everything. For fuck’s sake. How the hell are the rest of us supposed to measure up if she’s perfect at every fucking thing” he raised his voice but not loud enough for anybody in the house to hear.

Ali giggled and playfully swatted his arm. She was so grateful to have him in her life. Just for talks like this one. He and Sydney usually had a similar, if not the same, point of view on things but Kyle was always softer about it. This was a perfect example. It was very rare that Ali didn’t feel like she wanted to hear what her best friend had to say about something that was important to her, but this was one of those times. And if Kyle hadn’t been there, in person, prodding her to talk about it she probably wouldn’t have shared it with him and it would have bothered her more or for a longer period of time.

“She’s not perfect BB” she laughed with him as the dogs trotted over to find out what was making Kyle raise his voice. “But she’s perfect for me.”

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Tammye and Carol also came to the big old house for the first two weeks of August. They wanted to be there on the 14th for the wedding but they also wanted to be there to help with the new baby as well. Tammye wanted to wait until September when Deb had returned to Miami so the help could get spread out more, but she just couldn’t wait. She had heard the fear in her daughter’s voice and knew she had to check on things herself at some point that summer. It had been all she could do to wait until August and not rush right up at the end of June. They settled into the guestroom and quickly learned the new routine. In all honesty, Deb was glad for the help. She wasn’t getting any younger and Drew was an active little boy. After seven weeks she was looking forward to having
two more capable sets of hands around the house. Mike Christopher was coming up the following week so he could spend time with his wife and then attend the wedding. He had planned to surprise Deb with a week’s vacation after the wedding at the fancy resort where the wedding was being held. He knew his wife wanted to spend time with her grandchildren so he wasn’t sure if it was the right thing to do or not. He finally called Ali and asked her what he should do.

“Oh Mike, I think she’ll love it” Ali enthused over the phone. “It’s been a tough summer up here and she’s been slaving away. I’ve been trying to think of something like this to do for her, to thank her, so I think it’s a great idea.”

“I’m sure she’s told you this, but she doesn’t need any thanks Alex. I’ve never seen her happier than when she’s with you kids, and your kids” Mike replied sincerely. “I know this is a lot to ask, which is why she’s never asked before, and please don’t feel like you have to say yes. Just think about it...”

“Mike, what is it?” Ali asked sweetly.

“Would you bring the kids down for Christmas this year? For Christmas Eve and Christmas morning? I know it’s a lot so don’t say anything yet. Just think about it, ok?”

“I’d love to Mike, but I have to talk to Ashlyn before I say yes” the brunette’s brain whirled as she chewed on her bottom lip. “It could be a surprise. What do you think?” Ali’s voice was full of quiet excitement.

“I don’t know about the surprise” Mike chuckled. “I think she’ll want to plan for it if you do decide to make the trip.”

“You’re right” Ali nodded as she spoke into the phone. “And I won’t give you our answer until after the wedding. That way you’ll have a chance to see what you’re getting yourself into while there’s still time to back out” she laughed.

As she hung up the phone she could barely keep the smile off of her face. She had been trying to come up with a gift for her mother to try and thank her for everything she’d done for them that summer and nothing seemed nearly good enough. Leave it to Mike to come up with something that his wife would love more than anything else in the whole world. Deb always said he was good at the big, romantic moments. He wasn’t always great at some of the little things but he never let her down when it came to the big stuff and this was a great example.

What turned out to be one of the sweetest gestures Kyle would remember about his wedding, was having Mike Harris in attendance. The Harris contingent was hoping to come up to Gloucester for Josie’s christening in October and they were saving their money and working their schedules around that date. But Mike really wanted to be there for Kyle on his big day. Kyle had helped Mike immeasurably after Gram died and there had never been a good way to repay his kindness and thoughtfulness. Mike picked up a part-time, seasonal job in May that year so he could save enough money for the plane ticket up to Boston. He got up at the crack of dawn Saturday, Sunday and Monday mornings and spent three hours picking up trash along two of the town beaches. He couldn’t start before sunrise because it was too dark, and he had to be off the beach by 9am before the tourists started to arrive.

When Chris saw what his father was doing so he could be at Kyle’s wedding he decided that his family should make the trip too. They wanted to go, it was just so expensive to get all four of them up there and back. But Beth agreed. She held down the fort at home while Chris picked up some extra shifts and taught some extra lessons at the surf shop so they could afford the flights. What none
of them realized was how expensive the resort and hotel was. They would have to stay over Saturday night or there was really no point in going to the wedding. And the resort had a two-night minimum stay requirement during the summer. It was such a pain in the ass being the poor members of the family. The Harrises were used to it though. It just sucked. Beth was exploring some less expensive motels in the Chatham area one afternoon while Tammye and Carol were visiting and Carol took notice.

“Listen Ash, I don’t know how to do this without upsetting everybody so I need your advice and maybe your help” Carol explained over the phone back in late May.

She told Ashlyn that she wanted to pay for the Harris’ stay at the resort hotel for Kyle’s wedding but she wasn’t sure how to make it happen. She was worried about ruining the new friendship that had been painstakingly built between she and her girlfriend’s ex-husband.

“I have the money and I’d really like to do it but I know they’ll object. I have a hard time getting your mother to let me pay for our trips” she chuckled. “You’re a proud and stubborn family.”

“You can say that again” the keeper agreed with a laugh. “Yeah, dad will hate that you paid for his room. That’ll be really hard for him to swallow. He’d rather sleep on the beach. No offense.”

“None taken” Carol laughed. “I get it. That’s why I’m asking for help.”

“Maybe I can tell them I got a big check from Nike or something and ask them if they’ll let me spend it on them for the wedding, because it’s a special occasion. How does that sound?” Ashlyn asked, thinking out loud.

“That’s what I was thinking. Something like that. They’re not flying up until Saturday morning...”

“That’s a mistake” Ashlyn interrupted. “They’ll never get there in time. Cape traffic in the summer is brutal.”

“Damn.”

“Let me see if I can get them on the ferry or train to Hyannis once they land” the keeper quickly came up with a plan B. “Someone will have to go get them in Hyannis but that should be easy enough.”

Thirty minutes later they had their plan finalized and their cover story straight.

“I should have just done this in the first place Carol” Ashlyn admitted at the end of the call. “I’m sorry I didn’t think of it, but I’d like to pay for them instead of just telling them that I am.”

“You’ve got a lot on your plate right now honey. You let me help this time, ok?”

As she ended the call, Ashlyn thought about how lucky her mother was, and they all were really, to have Carol in her life. She had been the best thing to happen to the family since, well, since Ali came along. There was no knock on Beth, because everybody loved her and she was wonderful, but Ali and Carol seemed to rise above and lift the Harrises, as a whole, up. Maybe that’s what money did for you, allowed you to help the people you loved just a little bit more.

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And the last visitor on the schedule for August was not-so-little-anymore Meg. She was nine years old that year and they were officially increasing her time at the big old house to 2-1/2 weeks. She was old enough that she didn’t get homesick anymore. Ashlyn had been seven when she started
spending the whole summer with Grandma Lilian. She hadn’t been eased into it either. The first year was really hard and she missed Gram and her home but she had grown to love her summers at the big old house more and more every year. Once they stopped having babies Ashlyn wanted Meg to come up for the whole summer if Hannah would let her. Ashlyn knew the window of time for those visits would be closing soon as Meg got older and got more involved in activities and boys or girls at school. She wouldn’t want to be away from home for the whole summer. It was this argument that had finally swayed Ali as they discussed the visit back in late February. Meg had come up for her February vacation week again as Hannah and Dev celebrated their anniversary with another trip.

“It was fine last time, with Drew” Ashlyn recalled as they sat together in the nook with calendars open and different pieces of paper with names and dates spread out in front of them on the table.

“It was” Ali agreed, “but Whit still lived here and Drew was almost three months old that August. Our baby girl will only be two months old and it’ll just be me and my mom when you’re training or travelling.”

She was right and Ashlyn knew it, but she just wanted to spend some time with Meg. They had so much fun during her vacation visit the week before that the keeper was eager to repeat the experience as soon as possible.

“It’s not that I don’t want her here, you know that, right babe?” Ali asked, nervous because of her wife’s extended silence.

“No, I know” the blonde snapped out of her thoughts and smiled back at Ali. “And you’re right, about all of that. I forgot about how much help Whit was.”

The sad look on Ashlyn’s face broke the brunette’s heart.

“I just don’t want her to have a bad experience when she’s here” she tried to explain. “I don’t want to be bitchy to her because I’m exhausted. And I don’t want to ask my mom to help with another kid when she’ll already be busy with our two.”

“But she’ll be nine” the keeper countered. “She doesn’t need to be entertained anymore. And I’ll bring her with me to training every day. She loves soccer and she’ll love coming in with me. So that part’s taken care of.”

“But look at the month of August babe. It’s insane this year. And you have five games that month and three of them are on the road. When could she even come up?”

“She can come up the week after the wedding and stay until the end of the month” Ashlyn boldly proposed and held her breath as she looked at the calendar and glanced at her wife.

“Three weeks?” Ali’s eyebrows went up to her hairline. Labor Day was late that year, not falling until September 6th and making August extra long that summer. “Ash, I’ll never say no to Meg...”

“Isn’t that what you’re doing right now?” Ashlyn asked sadly, thinking her wife’s reaction had been a hard no.

“No, I’m not honey. What I’m saying is that I can’t commit to helping with her this August. I’m not trying to be a jerk, but if you want her to come up you’re going to have to be prepared to take care of her full time. If you can do that, I’m on board.”

“I can do that!” she enthused and grinned like a fool.

“Ash, I’m serious” the brunette cautioned. “Think about it. Maybe not three weeks. Maybe just ten
days this time. You can’t take her with you on the road so don’t even consider it” she quirked her eyebrow at her wife, knowingly.

Ashlyn’s face fell a little bit as she took in Ali’s words.

“Ok, two weeks then. We have two home games in a row on the 14th and the 21st. We can make that work, right?” the eager and earnest look on her face made Ali smile, despite her worry.

“Yeah” she agreed with a sigh. “She can’t arrive on the 14th because that’s the actual wedding date and you have a game, but we can move that around and make it work.”

“Yes!!!” Ashlyn yelled and pumped her fists into the air. “It’ll be great baby, you’ll see” she wrapped Ali up in a hug and kissed her cheek as she gently rubbed her 5-months pregnant baby bump.

Ali turned her head and brought their lips together in a slow, sweet kiss. The brunette thought about her sweet keeper and smiled into the kiss. She wasn’t asking for a new car or a fancy new surfboard or some other extravagant gift or toy to make her happy. All Ashlyn wanted was for her nine-year old kind-of daughter to come for a visit that summer. How fucking awesome was that?

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“Well this is a sight for sore eyes” Dr. Comello said with a grin as she walked into the examination room on Tuesday, August 3rd. Ali was lying on the table in a hospital gown and Ashlyn was standing close by, holding her hand and teasing her about something silly. They both had big smiles on their faces when the doctor joined them. “I’m glad to see those smiles again.”

“Thanks Doc. It's nice to see you too.”

“So things are...better now?” she asked cautiously as she brought up Ali’s medical records on her tablet and reached for a pair of gloves.

“Yeah, we’re better” Ali replied softly, embarrassed as she remembered storming out of their last appointment. “I’m really sorry about last time...I...”

“No need to apologize. Babies are tough. Everything about them is hard, except for themselves” she chuckled. “That’s nature’s little trick. The babies themselves are irresistible and soft and sweet and when you get a whiff of that baby smell” she closed her eyes and inhaled dramatically, “you forget how tough and hard everything else is.”

“Ain’t that the truth” Ashlyn chuckled and shook her head as she smiled at her wife and squeezed her hand.

Patty examined Ali inside and out and praised her for actually taking it easy for the past six weeks.

“I know it was hard to do nothing, or at least hopefully very little” she cocked her head at her patient and Ali shrugged and smiled apologetically. “But things look very good. It looks like you let your body heal so great job.”

“No more discharge?” Patty began going down her checklist of questions.

“No. Not since last week.”
“Cramps ok? Nothing too severe?”

“Just some mild ones. Maybe a couple of medium ones every once in a while” the brunette squinted, trying to remember so she could be specific.

“Everything else in working order? Moving your bowels ok?”

“Yes, fine” Ali blushed. She was pretty sure she would never not blush when talking about moving her bowels.

“How about hemorrhoids? I didn’t see anything too troublesome.”

“Just one little one but it’s feeling better.”

“Good, remember lots of water and fiber” the doctor advised and then stood and moved up near Ali’s chest so she could do the breast exam. “Any pain or swelling since last time?”

“No.”

“No issues with any lingering breastmilk or anything like that?”

“No. Nothing going on up here” Ali giggled even though she tried hard not to. “Back to my little chicken cutlets.”

Dr. Comello couldn’t help herself and she laughed loudly as she tried to finish the breast exam.

“Hey, hey now” Ashlyn spoke up. “Don’t be laughing at the most beautiful breasts in the world” she quirked her eyebrow at both women menacingly.

“I’m sorry” Patty said as she composed herself again. “I’ve never heard that one before. That was funny.”

“You can thank my jerk of a brother for that one” Ali smiled. “He used to tease me all the time.”

Patty finished, pronounced Ali’s breasts healthy, and took her gloves off as she sat back on her rolling stool to make notes in her tablet.

“Ok, here’s the deal. You are cleared for normal activity but please be smart about it. You had major surgery six weeks ago and it’s going to take a long time for the muscles in and around your stomach to start working again. Don’t push it. Here are some exercises that I’m allowing you to start doing as long as you don’t do too much.”

Ali took the sheet of paper and before Ashlyn could even open her mouth Patty handed her a copy too.

“I mean it Ali, you take it easy for at least two more weeks. Nothing from the bottom half of the page for two more weeks. I think you’ll feel pain if you push too hard and that pain means you’re doing too much. Listen to your body. You’ll be able to start doing more soon enough and you’ll get your strong stomach back. Just don’t try to go too fast. You’ll only end up hurting yourself.”

“I’ll be careful, I promise.”

“And don’t get fooled by whatever they’re selling on tv or online. Stick to these exercises and reps because they’re designed for a woman who had a c-section.”

“Some of these look like they’ll be really good for the transverse abs” Ashlyn commented as she read
through the list.

“Exactly, that’s the point” Patty nodded. “You have to activate those muscles again. Even though the muscles themselves weren’t actually cut, they were disconnected from your brain for a little while and these exercises will help you get them working again, help you re-establish that connection.”

“What about my scar?”

“It looks good. It’ll keep changing for about a year so try not to worry too much about it until then. You can keep doing the massage as long as it’s not uncomfortable. Just take it easy. You’re working on breaking down the collagen that’s trying to attach to the tissue beneath the scar. A gentle touch is all you need.”

“Got it.”

Ashlyn flinched and Ali gave her a puzzled look and a small, questioning smile. The keeper smiled back and squeezed her hand. She didn’t want to go backwards when they had come so far. Just like the cabbage leaves at the last appointment, the blonde was learning something brand new today and it bothered her. She wasn’t upset with Ali, she was disappointed in herself for not being as present this time around. She had no idea that Ali was massaging her c-section scar or that such a thing was even done. When had she missed that? It couldn’t have been too long ago because the incision had only fully healed a couple of weeks ago. She was pulled out of her thoughts when she heard her wife’s voice again.

“When will I get my period again?”

“Any time. It could be later this month. Or you might not get it for three months. Everybody’s different.”

“And sex?”

“You have a green light. Just start off slowly and remember you had major surgery so try not to be too acrobatic at first” Patty winked. “I’d like to see you take the next two weeks very slowly, just in general. I’ll feel better once you’ve had two full months to get things healed up around your incision.”

“So there’s nothing to worry about this time” Ashlyn asked. “I mean, like, last time, because she was breastfeeding, there was some dryness...”

“No, nothing to worry about there. Everything should still be working ok. Things are still moving around, like last time, so it may feel different for both of you, but there shouldn’t be any vaginal dryness or anything like that. Good question” the doctor nodded approvingly.

They finished up the last couple of questions and then Dr. Comello smiled broadly at them.

“Really guys, you’re doing great. Remember that this parenting stuff is hard and that you need to be patient with each other and yourselves. You got really good at having one kid and now you have two and it’s a whole different ballgame. Just remember you’re on the same team and you’ll be just fine.”

She was surprised but happy when both women gave her a big hug before they left the examination room.
An hour later Ali held Ashlyn’s hand and leaned her face against her keeper’s shoulder blade as they stood at the main desk of the Beauport Hotel. Ashlyn was doing the checking in and Ali was trying to be as close to her wife as possible, standing with her front to the blonde’s side and holding her as they stood there.

“Ready baby?”

“Yeah.”

Everything they did was intimate from walking with their heads bent towards each other and their arms wrapped around each other to another full-on body hug the whole time they were in the elevator. They didn’t kiss or grope, they just held. Ali had reserved a room at the same hotel by her old house that they had used the last time she was cleared for sex after having Drew. But Ashlyn had made other plans. She had learned her lesson the hard way last time about being unprepared. So this time she told her wife that she wanted to take her to the Beauport after her appointment so Ali had time to prepare herself mentally and physically. The keeper packed a bag with enough lube to grease an elephant as well as some extra clothes and some bath oils and massage oils and anything she could think of that would make Ali feel comfortable and relaxed. Ashlyn told Deb, Tammye and Carol that she was taking Ali to dinner after the appointment and made sure they were all ok with watching both Drew and Josie for them. Deb winked at her and the keeper blushed deeper than she thought was even possible.

For her part, Ali had scheduled the appointment knowing that her wife had to be at her first Breakers training Wednesday morning as they prepared for the first game back that Saturday after the FIFA break. The brunette remembered her last six-week postpartum appointment too and made sure this appointment was in the early afternoon so they would have time to go to a hotel and reconnect for a few hours afterwards. She was thrilled when Ashlyn told her about the Beauport plans. It had been a long eleven days since Ali had woken her wife up from her nap with an orgasm and they were both ready for more. Ali had tried to take care of her keeper twice since then but Ashlyn sweetly refused both times.

“Don’t take it the wrong way” she breathed out after a steamy make-out session during one of their naptimes. “Nothing would make me happier, but I won’t be able to keep my hands off of you or out of you, and it’s still too soon.”

They didn’t get the big suite like they had on their wedding night but they didn’t really need anything other than a bed and some privacy. It was almost 3pm and although it had been frustrating to make the drive all the way back up to Gloucester, they knew they would appreciate being so close to home when it was time to leave in four hours. The room had a nice ocean view but no soaking tub.

“I didn’t get the strawberries and champagne yet because I thought we could order room service for dinner” the keeper explained once the door clicked shut behind them. They were standing in the middle of the beautiful room in another meaningful embrace, Ali’s face tucked into her wife’s neck.
“But I can order them now if you want...”

“Ashlyn” the brunette purred as she pulled back to look at her favorite face. “All I want is you.”

Ashlyn crashed their lips together and moaned loudly into the intense kiss. She wrapped her arms around Ali’s back and held her close while the brunette encircled her neck with her arms, running her hands through her blonde hair and tugging it a little as they made out. The kiss was passionate but slow and sensuous. Their tongues dueled and explored and caressed while their hands began to roam.

“God I love kissing you” Ali exhaled when they broke for air. “Don’t get me wrong” she smirked, her face still only an inch away from Ashlyn’s, “but I could kiss you forever and nothing else and that would be ok.”

“Nothing else huh?” Ashlyn smirked back. She slowly ran her hands up and down Ali’s sides, making sure to graze the sides of her breasts with her thumbs each way. “As long as there are no restrictions to where I can kiss...”

Ali cut her off with another sultry kiss, licking her keeper’s lips before slipping her tongue back into her mouth and moaning into it. She pressed herself against Ashlyn’s body even harder and smiled when the blonde had to take a half step back to support them. The brunette was relieved when nothing hurt. She knew something would, at some point, cause her some pain but she was encouraged by her body’s response so far. Her breasts loved the way Ashlyn’s felt against them. Her abs were ok with the stretch of her arms up around the blonde’s neck and the pressure against her strong body. Ali was wet and could feel her passion collecting in her panties. And her incision didn’t even hurt yet, even though she had just pressed herself hard against her wife’s toned abs. Ali knew she would feel a tug or a pull or a pinch before too long. It had happened that morning when she was shaving between her legs. She bent over just far enough for just long enough and a spasm of pain made her sit right back up and blow out a few deep breaths. She wasn’t going to stay in her head the whole time this time though. And she wasn’t going to hurt Ashlyn’s feelings again by blocking her out of it. Ali reminded herself that it wouldn’t always be like this. They wouldn’t always be so careful with each other’s bodies or emotions. But right now, they needed to be careful with both. They had come too far to slide back now. It had been exactly 31 days since they had their stupid fight. It had been 23 days since Ashlyn destroyed her passenger seat in the driveway. It had been 45 days since she almost died giving birth. And it had been 20 days since she finally learned what that had been like for her wife. The work they had done in those 20 days, both of them, separately and together, had allowed them to get to where they were today. Wrapped around each other in a beautiful hotel room full of desire, love, and possibilities.

“I love you” Ashlyn murmured as she moved her lips down her wife’s neck and lowered a hand to her voluptuous ass.

Ali needed more. She hadn’t had an orgasm 11 days ago but she had been thinking about having one ever since. She brought her hands to the bottom of Ashlyn’s neat, black polo shirt and lifted it up. Her breath hitched when the back of her fingers touched the bare skin of her stomach. The keeper leaned back and let Ali lift the shirt over her head and past her tattooed arms until it fell to the floor next to them.

“Mmmmm” Ali smiled as she looked at her beautiful wife’s torso which included a sexy black bra. “Look how gorgeous you are Ashlyn” she bit her bottom lip and moved her hands and her eyes all over the keeper’s chest and arms and sides and stomach before kissing her again.

Ali’s hands found their way to the blonde’s belt buckle and had it, as well as her jeans, undone in less than a minute. None of her movements were rushed though. Everything was deliciously languid,
every kiss, every touch, every squeeze. Ashlyn had planned to take her own clothes off first, so Ali wouldn’t feel self-conscious. But she hadn’t counted on her wife taking control so quickly. She should have known though. When they had been in this position two years ago Ali had been tentative and nervous and still very uncomfortable with her body. This time Ashlyn could tell the brunette was better prepared. She could tell the last 11 days had been difficult for her and she was looking forward to giving her the release she so desperately needed. The keeper backed up slowly, stepped out of her shoes and pulled her jeans down to the floor. She freed her ankles, removed her socks and stood up in front of her wife who had been watching carefully.

“I want those off too” Ali pointed at her sexy black boy briefs with the pink hearts on them. “And your sexy bra, please.”

It had been a while since they had made love, not counting Ali’s afternoon wake-up call 11 days ago, and Ashlyn was surprised to find herself nervous. 45 days was a long time and the keeper didn’t think she had been naked in front of her wife like this since then. She was forgetting the bath after her meltdown in the driveway, but Ali wouldn’t count that either. It had been more of a medical emergency situation and not the least bit romantic. Ashlyn reached behind her back and unhooked her bra, leaving it dangling off of her shoulders until she bent down to remove her boy shorts and it fell to the floor with the rest of her clothes. She stood up tall, completely naked, and shivered when she saw the hungry look on her wife’s face. She’d seen the look dozens of times before, maybe hundreds, and it had the same effect on her that it always did. She felt her heart beat faster and her stomach start to tingle as the passion pooled between her legs and her breathing sped up. But there was something else behind the hunger that afternoon in the hotel room. Now that the rest of her body was responding it was difficult for the blonde to get a read on what she was seeing. Was it hesitation or fear? She was sure Ali must be nervous, no matter how much she wanted to have sex. Before she could spend another second thinking about it, the look was gone, consumed by the desire that darkened the brunette’s eyes even more.

Ashlyn realized she had no idea what to do with her hands and she was about to close the distance between her and her wife when Ali smiled bashfully and started to take her own clothes off. She unbuttoned her loose-fitting capri pants, stretchy yoga pants were not good for her incision and she hadn’t been able to wear them since the baby was born, and bent over to pull them down. She winced a little and felt a twinge near her incision. It didn’t really hurt, but it was uncomfortable. Bending at the waist was going to be what caused her lingering pain for many months to come. As soon as Ashlyn saw the wince she knelt down, pulled the pants to the floor and helped her wife step out of them.

“Thanks” Ali blushed and pulled Ashlyn up off of her knees.

The keeper kissed her lips and then took her hand and led her over to the bed. If she had been nervous disrobing like that then Ali would surely be even more so.

“Should we get the champagne and strawberries?” Ashlyn asked one last time, thinking the champagne might take the edge off for her wife.

“No, but dinner sounds good, in a while” Ali sat on the foot of the bed where the blonde had led her and watched with loving eyes as she knelt in front of her and started unbuttoning her blouse for her.

It took a few minutes to get all of the buttons undone and the shirt off of her beautiful brunette, but Ashlyn stuck with it and was rewarded with a display of goosebumps that appeared on Ali’s skin when it felt the slightly cooler air in the room.

“You’re so beautiful Ali. I swear, you’re the most gorgeous woman in the whole world” Ashlyn said reverently as she tried to keep her eyes on her wife’s face instead of the rest of her exposed skin.
Ali sat in her panties and bra with her hands in her lap, vainly trying to cover up her stomach. She still had a pregnancy pouch and it made her belly look like she was about six months pregnant. The same thing had happened with Drew too and it was just what happened after you had a baby. She knew that but she still didn’t like it. Ashlyn moved her warm hands up and down the brunette’s thighs, enjoying how soft her skin was. She moved her hands to Ali’s hips and then ran them up and down her sides. She was excited to spend some time on her wife’s breasts. She knew Ali was disappointed about not being able to breastfeed, but the silver lining was that her breasts weren’t constantly sore and sensitive. Ashlyn was looking forward to playing with them again while they had sex.

“Are you doing ok?” she asked sweetly as she gazed into her favorite cinnamon eyes.

“Yeah, I mean, I’m horny as hell but I know we have to go slow so it’s killing me” she chuckled and looked down shyly. “But I’m ready.”

“Let’s get you comfortable then” Ashlyn grinned and winked. “I can’t stand to be this close to you anymore without being able to taste you.”

Ali moved up the bed and pulled the covers halfway down as she piled some pillows up against the headboard and leaned back into them with a smirk.

“I’m all yours babe” she purred as she took her bra off and playfully tossed it at the blonde.

“Wait a minute” the keeper jumped up and moved quickly to the bag she had packed. “I almost forgot” she smiled sheepishly as she returned to the foot of the bed holding a single, deep orange rose in her hand. “This is for you” her smile turned tender but the lustful look in her eyes completed the picture for her wife.

“Oh Ash” Ali returned the smile, dipped her head and looked at her keeper through her lashes. She remembered the only other time her wife had given her orange roses and how special that birthday weekend had been for both of them. It was the summer Drew was born and Ali had been unsure of her postpartum body and feeling self-conscious about it. Ashlyn didn’t trot out the orange roses for just any romantic getaway. “I have a fiery blaze kind of feeling for you too, sexy” Ali purred.

Ashlyn crawled up her wife’s body with the rose between her teeth until Ali took it from her and kissed her deeply, enjoying the fragrant aroma of the delicate flower. The keeper finished pulling the covers down as she moved back to the brunette’s feet. She kissed her way up Ali’s leg to the top of her thigh and smiled when she felt it quiver beneath her lips. The blonde went back and kissed her way up the other leg and finished by pressing a warm, open-mouthed kiss to Ali’s mound, still covered by her panties.

“Mmmmmm” the brunette moaned. “Jesus you feel good.”

The keeper slowly kissed her way up her wife’s body, stopping for some extra sucks and licks on both tattoos inside her hips. She made sure to kiss her belly, even though she knew it made Ali a little self-conscious. Ashlyn wasn’t going to skip any part of her wife’s beautiful body, well, not unless Ali really insisted. The keeper was happy to see the brunette respond to her mouth on the wave tattoo. One of Ashlyn’s secret fears was that one day, for whatever reason, Ali’s body wouldn’t react to her mouth or fingers on that sweet spot. She was very happy today wasn’t the day.

“I cannot tell you how excited I am to love these babies up” the keeper enthused between kisses as she worked on Ali’s breasts. “I’ve really missed them.”

She swirled her tongue around one nipple and then sucked the whole breast into her mouth and
moaned. She flicked Ali’s nipple a few times with her tongue and then slid her mouth underneath the breast and sucked hard. She wanted to leave a mark and got even more excited when she felt Ali’s hand in the back of her hair, holding her head against her chest.

“Shit babe, that feels so nice.”

Ashlyn moved her mouth to Ali’s other breast and repeated several of the same steps, this time grazing her teeth against the nipple once she had the breast in her mouth. Ali hissed and then moaned as she closed her eyes and pressed her head back against the pillows. The keeper straddled her wife, careful to support almost all of her own weight, and brought their lips together in a hungry kiss. Ali was more than ready for this and if they both hadn’t been trying to be careful Ashlyn knew she would have flipped them over and climbed on top of the lanky blonde right that minute.

“Do you know what you want first?” she mumbled hotly against the brunette’s neck after they broke the kiss for air.

“Just...you...” Ali panted as she moved both hands down to grab Ashlyn’s bare ass and squeezed.

The keeper took her time and kissed her way back down her wife’s body, trailing her hands behind her to tease her breasts again and caress her sides and stomach. She paused when her hands got to Ali’s hips and she hooked her fingers under the sides of her panties and looked up at her beautiful brunette for permission. Ali batted her eyes at her keeper and lifted her hips up so she could pull the soft, white panties down past her strong thighs and off her legs.

“Fuck baby, I’ve missed this so much. And you, not just this...” she tried to backtrack in case she had hurt the brunette’s feelings.

“It’s ok. I’ve missed this too. I know what you mean. Just relax. I’m doing good, I promise” Ali reached down to caress her wife’s face and they smiled at each other.

The keeper was done smiling and talking and waiting. She knew she was in trouble as soon as she caught Ali’s scent. As much as seeing her gorgeous wife naked and ready for her stoked her fire, nothing turned her on more than the smell of her wet pussy. It had been 45 days since she had last experienced it. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. Fuck that was amazing. Ashlyn dragged her fingers through the brunette’s soaked folds, up and back and then up again, loving the way her hips started rising to meet her at the end of each upstroke. It was going to be difficult for the blonde to go slow too, but she had to make it happen.

“I’ve gotta tell you” Ashlyn began hoarsely as she fought for control over her rampaging desire. “I’m having a really hard time not losing my mind right now” she swallowed hard and looked up at her wife as her fingers continued to tease her entrance. “I know we have to be smart and take our time, but goddamn Al. You’re fucking killing me right now.”

Ali smiled down at her wife and bent both her knees up to encourage her. She believed her words and took them to heart, just the way they were intended. Her confidence boosted and her own lust increased as she reached for Ashlyn’s free hand by her hip and squeezed it.

“I love you” was all she could say in that moment and the words left her lips full of emotion and lust.

The keeper lay down on her stomach and pulled herself up closer to her wife’s center, wet, wanting and waiting. Ashlyn wrapped both of her arms around Ali’s thick thighs and reached for Ali’s hand again with her left hand. The brunette squeezed it again, happy to have it back and wanting to feel closer to her love, and pulled it up to her breast. She kept her hand on top of Ashlyn’s as it started to massage and caress her right breast. The blonde wasted no time putting her tongue to work between
her wife’s legs. She licked up and down slowly at first, keeping her tongue flat and using broad
strokes to start with. Ali moaned when she felt the shiver from the contact travel all the way up her
spine. She buried her left hand in Ashlyn’s hair and started playing with it, tugging it every once in a
while and applying pressure to the back of her keeper’s head now and then.

“Christ” Ashlyn breathed out after a minute. “You are not making this easy on me. Fuck, you taste
good.”

Ali bucked her hips up when she felt the blonde’s lips back at her entrance, teasing the opening and
then moving up to circle her clit lightly. Ashlyn couldn’t put her right arm across the brunette’s hips
and lower abdomen to hold her down like she usually did because that’s right where her incision
was. She really wasn’t sure how much she should be touching that area at all so she was planning to
avoid it, aside from some gentle kisses. Instead, she grabbed Ali’s hip with her right hand and held
onto her hipbone. She could just reach her wife’s wave tattoo and super sexy spot with the tips of her
long fingers and started ghosting them across the ink.

“Ashlyn” the brunette gasped when she felt the touch. She jerked her hips up in response and tugged
the blonde hair hard. “Fuck...”

They were going slow but it felt like everything had just jumped up two levels when they weren’t
looking. Ashlyn drove her tongue into Ali’s hot core and swirled it around several times which made
the brunette’s hips roll with her. The keeper pressed her face against her slick folds and pushed her
tongue as deep as it would go. She moved her face from side to side, rubbing her cheeks against her
pussy lips and making Ali moan loudly. Ashlyn played with her right breast, tugging at Ali’s nipple
and then pinching it between her fingers while the brunette did the same to her own left breast with
her other hand. Ali moved her right hand up and down Ashlyn’s left arm, caressing it the whole time
as the keeper worked up her breast and nipple.

“Jesus babe, that’s good. Fuck you make me feel so fucking good” she purred as she pressed her
head back into the pillows and closed her eyes.

Ashlyn spent a long time eating her wife out and loved every minute of it. She licked and sucked
every inch of her and traced letters against her silky folds, occasionally moving up and sucking on
her clit just enough to make Ali groan in pleasure and pull her hair again. She remembered the last
time they were in this situation and Ali had complained about having to plan everything out instead
of just having sex. The keeper knew it was a calculated risk but she was pretty sure Ali was in a
much different spot this time. The baby hadn’t actually come through her vagina this time so nothing
was stretched or bruised or sore like it had been with Drew’s birth. Ashlyn decided to go for it but
paid supreme attention to her wife’s reactions just in case.

The keeper got on her knees, pulled her arms back inside Ali’s bent up legs and kissed her way
down one of her thighs to her clit again. The brunette let her legs fall out to her sides and opened her
eyes to watch what her sexy wife had in store for her. Ashlyn looked up at her and smirked as she
slowly pushed one of her long fingers into her wife’s pussy while she lapped at her sensitive clit with
her tongue. Any worries she had about pushing the brunette too far too fast vanished when she heard
Ali’s throaty groan and saw her arch her back and grab two fistfuls of sheets.

“Yessssss...she groaned and bit her bottom lip with a loud moan. “Mmmmmmmmmmm...”

Ashlyn watched her face intently as she got to work. She started thrusting her finger, carefully, and
increased the pressure of her tongue on Ali’s clit. She loved the way her beautiful brunette’s chest
started to heave and her mouth slowly dropped open.

“More...” Ali gasped out. “Please babe, more...”
“Faster?” she mumbled against her wife’s sweet flesh. She hadn’t stopped thrusting and licked with her tongue between questions. “Or another finger?”

“Yes...both...fuck...don’t stop...”

The keeper grinned against her wife’s clit, lapping at it again while she inserted a second finger into her pulsing core. She began to thrust again, slowly at first, as she sucked Ali’s clit into her ravenous mouth and flicked her tongue across it several times. The long groan that came out of her wife’s mouth confirmed she was on the right track. Ashlyn slowly and steadily increased her thrusting speed and pressure over the next several minutes, feeling her own passion rise as she listened to her wife pant and moan and grunt with her movements. Ali’s face was incredible to watch. It was a constantly moving tableau of passionate expressions. She frowned slightly and then bit her lip hard. She raised her eyebrows up to her hairline and then let her mouth go slack as she turned her head to the side and pressed it into the pillow. Ali had both hands pinching and tugging at her own breasts as her orgasm got closer and closer.

“Unnnhhhh...yes, yes, fuck unnnhhhh, yes...”

Ashlyn could feel how close her girl was to her release. She felt Ali’s walls pressing in against her fingers as they pumped in and out of her hot, wet pussy.

“Mmmmmmmm” the blonde hummed against Ali’s clit and then started flicking it as fast as she could with her strong tongue.

She curled the fingers of her right hand up as she stroked her wife’s center and, after another minute of the intense sensations, Ali came hard. The brunette’s body spasmed and she kicked both of her legs out as her orgasm crashed all around her.

“Ohhhhh...yesssssss!!!” she shouted, loudly, as she shook and rode the waves of intense pleasure.

Ashlyn pulled her fingers out and moved her mouth down to lick up all of her wife’s sweet juices, moaning as she felt and tasted how wet she was. She still had her eye on Ali’s face, not sure what exactly she was watching for or afraid of, but vigilant nonetheless. Both of Ali’s hands had moved from her breasts down to her abdomen when she came and they were still there, protectively covering her incision area. The brunette reached down and pulled her keeper’s face up, trying to bring her all the way up to her but not being able to exert that much strength yet.

“Come up here” she commanded softly, opening her eyes and trying to focus them on her gorgeous wife. “I need you up here now.”

What she didn’t tell her keeper was that she was a little afraid of what might come out of her vagina in that moment. She was pretty sure it would be nothing but her usual juices but, after dealing with discharge from the baby and pregnancy for almost five weeks, she didn’t want Ashlyn’s face down there just in case. The blonde dutifully climbed up her wife’s sensitive, still-tingling and twitching body, lying next to her and letting her cuddle into her as she tried to catch her breath.

“Are you ok honey?” the keeper leaned her head back to look at Ali.

“More than” the brunette replied breathlessly. “That felt amazing. Thank you so much babe.”

“Are you sure? You grabbed your belly when you came...”

“I was afraid it would hurt, like it hurts sometimes when I bend over still, but it didn’t” she answered with a shy smile and kissed her keeper’s lips. “It felt so good” she purred and kissed Ashlyn again, this time a long, slow, deep kiss that left them both out of breath.
The relief on Ashlyn’s face was only outdone by the dimpled grin there too. She tenderly brushed some brunette hair away from her favorite face and then pressed soft kisses all over it making Ali giggle after a few minutes.

“Thank you for being so sweet with me honey” Ali rolled them over so Ashlyn was flat on her back. “If you were half as turned on as I was then that must have been really hard to take it slow.” She straddled the sexy blonde’s hips and bent down to kiss her pretty, pink nipples. “Thank you.”

The brunette wasted no time. She knew her keeper was almost too excited and she needed to come as soon as possible. Ali slid off to Ashlyn’s side and moved her fingers down over her mound and scratched at her short hairs while she settled her mouth onto the blonde’s right nipple and began sucking and licking.

“Oh God, yes...” Ashlyn murmured as she reached down and grabbed Ali’s ass.

“Just relax” the brunette cooed. “I’ll take care of you sexy. And I won’t even tease you... this time.”

By 5:30pm they had each had two orgasms and ordered room service. They were happy, relaxed, satisfied and starving. Ashlyn hung up the phone, leaning on her elbow on her left side as she reached over to the bedside table, and felt her wife wrap herself around her from behind. Ali wound her arms and top leg around the blonde, even resting her chin on Ashlyn’s neck after kissing it. Octopus mode activated.

“They said twenty minutes” the keeper relaxed into the embrace with a smile on her face. “Mmmm, you feel good” she turned her head to the side so Ali could kiss her cheek. “Think you can wait twenty minutes or do you need one of the emergency protein bars I packed?”

“Oooh, holding out on me I see” the brunette giggled and gently pinched one of her wife’s nipples.

“Hey!” Ashlyn yelped and tried to turn in her wife’s arms but couldn’t move. “I forget how strong you are sometimes” she chuckled and turned her head for another kiss. After she received it she tried to turn again and failed, again. “Can I please turn around so I can hold you too?”

“I don’t know” Ali pondered the question and pressed herself closer against Ashlyn’s bare ass. “I missed this so much when I was so pregnant. The feel of your cute butt up against me like this” she sighed happily as Ashlyn reached her arm around behind the brunette and pulled her in closer still.

“I get it” the keeper replied knowingly. “I can wait” she pulled Ali’s hand up to her lips and kissed it, patiently.

“This was so much easier and better this time, don’t you think?” Ali asked after a few minutes of quiet snuggling.

“Definitely. But part of that was because we had been in this situation before. So we came in with a competitive advantage this time.”

“And my body wasn’t so beat up this time because of the c-section delivery” Ali added and kissed Ashlyn’s neck.

“But that created its’ own challenges in a way. With your incision...”

“Yeah, you’re right” the brunette was moving her hand all around her wife’s body, slowly caressing it as they talked. “Maybe it’s just because we knew what was going to happen this time.”

“You’re sure you feel ok baby?” Ashlyn asked for probably the seventh time in two hours.
“I feel great honey, I promise you” Ali cooed into her keeper’s ear and sucked on her earlobe.

“Hey, don’t start something you can’t finish now” the blonde warned and pulled her ear away from Ali’s sultry mouth. “The food will be here before either of us can get where we need to go so behave.”

“I can’t help it. It’s just so nice to be naked with you like this. I love it.”

“Me too. And we can love it more after we eat” the keeper stated definitively and pulled her wife’s hand away from her crotch. “Hey let me give you your present” she suggested with excitement in her voice. She still couldn’t move with Ali’s tentacles wrapped around her and holding her securely in place. “Please, can I get up and give you your present now princess?”

“Alright, but come right back here with it” the brunette acquiesced and released her with a pout. She watched as her naked wife walked to the bag she had packed on the desk near the foot of the bed. Ashlyn pulled out a few things before she found the flat, iPad sized jewelry box she was looking for. “Is that my robe?” Ali asked incredulously.

“Oh, um, yeah” Ashlyn blushed a little. “I wasn’t sure what you’d want to wear and I wanted you to feel comfortable this afternoon.”

“Very cute babe” Ali grinned at her sweet wife not wanting to make her feel bad about her definitely unsexy robe. “Thank you for being so thoughtful and bringing it” she leaned over and kissed her keeper’s lips. “Now get back in this bed with me.”

When they were both leaning up against the headboard, legs tangled and sitting as close as humanly possible, Ashlyn cleared her throat and handed the expensive looking jewelry box to the love of her life.

“I know nothing can ever be enough to thank you for bringing our beautiful daughter into the world, but I wanted to give you something to mark the occasion at least” she explained as she watched Ali lift the hinged top of the velvet box up and gasp.

“Oh Ashlyn, they’re just beautiful. Oh thank you so much honey.” She carefully lifted out a string of real pearls and noticed the matching earrings that were in the bottom two corners of the jewelry box. “And earrings too? I love them. Thank you sweetheart” she gave her wife a meaningful kiss.

“I know pearls are sort of old-fashioned but they’re Josie’s birthstone and I thought you might want to wear a nice string of pearls someday” she shrugged her shoulders and looked shyly at her wife. “You know, when you’re 60.”

“Hey, pearls never go out of style. They’re the most classic piece of jewelry you can own. And I love them. And every time I wear them I’ll think of our little girl and how much I love you.”

Ali brought their lips together in another kiss that turned passionate and they started to get carried away. Just when they were about to keep getting carried away there was a loud knock on the door and they both jumped.

“Room service” came the voice from the other side of the door.
Ashlyn went quickly to the door while Ali put the pearls around her neck and secured the closure. The blonde grabbed her wife’s robe and threw it on, holding it closed with one hand, before opening the door. The brunette giggled when she saw her keeper’s long arms sticking out of the too-short sleeves. God did she love that woman.

“Thanks” Ashlyn said quickly and handed him his tip. “I’ll take it from here.”

“I can bring it in and get it set up for you ma’am” he tried dutifully.

“No thanks, really, I’ve got it” she said as patiently as she could and watched the door finally close behind him. “Geez buddy, take a hint and get the fuck out” she said quietly as she wheeled the cart over to the side of the bed.

Ali laughed out loud at both the comment and at the sight of her wife, hunched over the room service cart with her ill-fitting fuchsia robe wide open.

“Wait! I need a picture of this, just hold still for one minute” she said as she grabbed her phone off the bedside table and snapped a couple of quick pics. “Perfect” she grinned her nose-crinkling grin at her sweet wife. “Honestly babe” she got serious a few minutes later as they both sat at the edge of the bed eating dinner. “You are something else and I love you so much.”

“I love you too honey” Ashlyn replied with a tilt of her head, surprised by the emotion coming from the brunette out of the blue. “You ok?”

“I’m good, I just can’t get over how you make me feel” she shook her head in wonderment as she tried to explain what she had been thinking about for the past ten minutes while they ate. “We’ve been here for three hours now and you made me feel every kind of thing while we were having sex. And I mean all sorts of things” she wagged her eyebrows at her wife. “But also trust and respect and love and tenderness and compassion too. And then you gave me these beautiful pearls and you were so sweet and romantic and thoughtful. And then you were adorable and funny and had me laughing out loud with the robe and the room service guy.” She shrugged her shoulders and shook her head again. “I’ll just never understand how I got so lucky. You’re the most wonderful person I’ve ever met and you’re the only person in the whole world that I would ever want to be with.” She paused to steady her voice. “I love you more than anything Ashlyn.”

They kissed for a minute and enjoyed the closeness they were sharing on their little afternoon getaway. Ali had almost forgotten about her pregnancy pouch altogether. She had always trusted her keeper, but the level they were at almost six years and two kids later was astounding. It took her breath away sometimes when she thought about it.

“I love you too” the keeper replied

“I read a quote the other day that I can’t get out of my mind because it terrifies me and thrills me at the same time.”

“Let’s hear it” Ashlyn reached over and gave Ali’s leg a soft squeeze.

“Love
(n.) Giving someone the power to destroy you, and trusting them not to.”
And so August began. The Breakers left three days after Ali and Ashlyn’s afternoon delight at the Beauport Hotel. They had two away games in five days and were travelling to Atlanta for the Saturday game and then to Orlando for a Wednesday night game on August 11th. Ashlyn went home to Satellite Beach Wednesday night with her brother and her father. It was a wacky situation because Tammye and Carol were up in Gloucester and the rest of the Harris clan would be joining them in just a couple of days for Kyle and Nathan’s wedding. But the keeper had promised herself that she wouldn’t skip any more Orlando visits if she could help it. Ali had all the help she could ever need that week and had encouraged her wife to go spend a day surfing and doing something for herself for a change. Ashlyn wasn’t going to turn the opportunity down. She spent most of the day Thursday on the beach, surfing and relaxing and tuning in to the ocean and her own peace of mind. It had been a rough fucking two months and she was still struggling through her PTSD therapy. They were making progress though and Ashlyn was encouraged. Thankfully it was a pretty minor case of PTSD. The keeper felt bad even calling it that because it’s not like she went to war or anything. She wasn’t belittling her own experience, because it had certainly been traumatizing for her, but she was acutely aware that her case was minor in comparison to so many military veterans who suffered from the disorder. She promised herself that when she had more time she would start volunteering and visiting PTSD patients with Fred. A lot of times dogs were a great help or at least an easy mood lifter and she knew Fred’s easy-going personality would be perfect for the visits.

The outcome of the games hadn’t been great and so far the team wasn’t rising up to their keeper’s challenge from just before the EUROs break. Abby Smith got the start in Atlanta and they lost to the Fever who were still pretty new and not very good. It was a game the Breakers should have won. Ashlyn started the game in Orlando and they played to a scoreless draw. It had been a good, competitive game and a rematch of the Championship game from the year before. One of the highlights of the game for the Breakers was Ashlyn stopping Marta on a one on one breakaway attempt. If the blonde was telling the truth, which she only admitted to her wife, she got lucky and guessed right as the Brazilian superstar took her shot. The block made all the highlight shows that night and boosted Ashlyn’s ego just a bit. Between the surfing and the ego boost she came home to Boston Friday morning feeling better than she had in months. Except for the nagging pain in her hip that got worse after each game. She was desperate to keep her starts so she didn’t tell the trainers about it. But Dani, the head trainer who had been helping Ashlyn get her body ready for the past seven years, knew something was up. She challenged the keeper Friday afternoon before the team meeting.

“So how long are you going to limp around like that without telling me what’s going on?” the trainer pressed her thumb into Ashlyn’s sore left hip.

“Ow! Fuck Dani” she kept her voice low and complained through gritted teeth as they walked down the empty corridor between the locker room and the meeting room. “I’m not even limping. How the hell?”

“Look Harris” Dani chuckled. “I know when something’s bothering you whether you like it or not. Did this just happen in Orlando?”

“Yeah, it’s been sore before but nothing like this” Ashlyn admitted as her shoulders slumped.

“Come see me after the meeting and we’ll check it out” Dani instructed, leaving no doubt that it was not just a request.

“Bursitis” Ashlyn spoke into her phone as she drove home late that afternoon.
“Aw babe, is it really painful?” Ali asked, her voice concerned and sympathetic.

“Yes, it hurts. But I’ll live” the keeper sighed. “I wish I was with you guys.”

Ali’s heart clenched when she heard the sadness in her wife’s voice. She had spoken with her the night before and Ashlyn had sounded happy and rejuvenated after spending the day with her Florida ocean. They knew this weekend was going to be a challenge and it had already begun. Kyle and Nathan had driven down to Chatham, on Cape Cod, Thursday so they could get settled in for their big day on Saturday. They wanted to be rested and organized for the family dinner they were having Friday evening and they wanted to be there Friday morning when a lot of their guests were going to be arriving. Nathan had a lot of friends from Boston and Kyle had a lot of friends from NYC who were coming for the weekend. It was going to be one big party and everyone was excited. The idea of having a wedding without any of the boring parts and just a big party was a popular one and the affirmative RSVPs had poured in.

Friday morning, Ali had packed up the huge Suburu SUV that Ashlyn had arranged for them to use for the two weeks around the wedding date. Tammye, Carol, Deb and Mike Christopher rode down with the brunette and her two children. Ken, Vicki, Koty and Tanner were close behind with Sydney, Dom, Cassius and Sandi bringing up the rear of the caravan. Most of the Scott Kriegers were coming down Saturday and staying at a different, less expensive hotel that was nearby. Kyle and Nathan had recommended a couple of local hotels and motels for people who didn’t want to or couldn’t afford to stay at the fancy resort.

Whitney’s plans were a little bit different but slightly more important. Ryan was away, again, travelling with the Cannons so she was going to attend solo and tag along with the Krieger brigade. But once Ashlyn and Hannah finalized the travel plans for Meg’s vacation, Whitney had volunteered to help with Meg that Saturday instead. She went with Ashlyn to the airport late Saturday morning to pick up the 9-year old who had flown by herself for the very first time. It had been nerve-wracking for Ashlyn, Hannah and Meg but they had done it. The threesome went in to the stadium for Ashlyn’s home game against the Portland Thorns which was the Lifetime TV Game of the Week. After the game they were going to drive down to the Cape and join the wedding party already in progress. Abby Smith started and helped the Breakers get the win while Ashlyn sat on the bench secretly not that upset because her hip was killing her.

“We wish you were here too honey” Ali replied sincerely, Friday afternoon. “We miss you. I miss you” her voice was low and soft.

The couple had been particularly close before Ashlyn hit the road for a full week. They had two days between their afternoon getaway at the hotel and the keeper’s departure Friday morning with the team and they had made the most of them. They hadn’t had sex again, there wasn’t a lot of time or privacy at the big old house those days, but they had just been very intimate with each other whenever they could. They touched each other as often as possible, exchanging hugs and kisses and caresses anytime they were nearby. To go from that to completely separate for a full eight days was quite the contrast and it had hit them both harder than they thought it would.

“I miss you too. I wish I hadn’t stayed in Satellite Beach yesterday...”

“Ashlyn” the brunette chastised delicately, her voice soft and tender. “You needed that. I could hear it in your voice last night. That day did you so much good. I’m glad you did that.”

“Oh, so you don’t mind not seeing me for a week then?” the keeper quipped. “Is there someone else? Should I be concerned?” she teased and, despite the painful hip, Ali could hear the lightness in her voice.
“Yeah, you got me” Ali chuckled. “I’m seeing a new redhead. She’s in my arms every three hours, like clockwork. I can’t get any sleep, she’s really wearing me out.”

Ashlyn laughed out loud and her wife joined her as they talked about the trip to Chatham and how cute Drew had been talking nonstop to four of his seven grandparents during the drive. Ali made sure to run through the schedule for the busy next day so her keeper wouldn’t forget anything.

“I packed the dogs’ bag already and filled out the contact info sheet so all you have to do is grab them and the bag and drop them off on your way to the airport tomorrow morning. I put the info sheet in the...”

“In the outside pocket of the dog bag” Ashlyn completed her sentence for her and smiled. “I know baby. You already told me. Thank you for getting them all ready for me. I appreciate it. And I promise I won’t forget to take them to their pet hotel.”

“I know you won’t forget” Ali fibbed. “I just want to make it easier for you.”

“I know Al. Thank you. How’s the cottage? Everything ok?”

They had rented one of the biggest cottages for their three-night stay and it was one of the six that were right on the beach. There were six bedrooms and three full bathrooms with another half-bath just off the kitchen. The entire Harris crew would be staying there along with Ashlyn’s young family, Meg and Whitney. Ken and Vicki had rented one of the smaller cottages, a two-bedroom, for themselves and the boys. And Sydney and Dom had done the same thing for themselves and Cassius and Sandi. The only way they could afford it was because of Dom’s new job and they were all grateful for it and the cute little cottage on the beach. Deb and Mike had rented out one of the adults-only spa suites for their week-long vacation and Deb had been so excited when her husband surprised her with it that she had cried. They didn’t have the same room that Ali and Ashlyn had stayed in, but it was the same type of arrangement. Ali happily helped her mom pick out spa treatments after they had all checked in and gotten settled that morning.

“It’s amazing honey” Ali enthused. “I can’t wait for you to see it. It’s so close to the beach that we have to lock the door on the ocean side so your son doesn’t just leave on his own” she chuckled. “He’d be in the water before one of us could catch him.”

“Somehow this isn’t making me feel any better...”

“Oh don’t be such a worry-wort” the brunette teased. “There are three of us here now and mom and Mike will be hanging out down here too. Dad and Vicki and the boys are just a little ways up the beach and Syd’s right next door to us. There are lots of grown-ups to watch your little shark.”

“There better be” the keeper grumbled but couldn’t stay upset for more than a few seconds before she heard Drew in the background.

“Mommy I thirsty” his sleepy little voice said.

“Hi sweet boy” Ali cooed and Ashlyn could hear a big kiss land on her son’s cheek. “Caro’s getting you juice right now baby. Did you have a good nap?”

The keeper’s heart swelled as she listened to the adorable scene unfold on the other end of the phone. That was some of the best time you could get with 27-month old Drew. He was extra snuggly after waking up from his nap, with his sweaty little body and his scrunched up little face just trying to wake up and adjust to his surroundings. It was one of the few times during the day when he was stationary and still. Ashlyn listened to her beautiful wife talk to their son and ended the call. She had
been sitting, parked in the driveway for the past ten minutes and she ran into the house and let the
dogs out before joining them in the backyard and Facetiming Ali right back.

“There’s Mama” she pointed at Ashlyn’s face on her phone and then tilted it back so the keeper
could see Drew.

“Hi buddy” Ashlyn greeted the toddler enthusiastically but quietly.

They talked and laughed for the next half hour and it did Ashlyn’s heart good to be with her family,
if only remotely, for the short period of time. Drew had grinned from ear to ear when he registered
his mother’s face and voice on the brunette’s phone. He reached his pudgy little hand out to try and
touch the blonde and her heart melted even more. Ali had panned around the room so Ashlyn could
see her mother feeding Josie and Carol hovering around in the background ready to get anybody
whatever they needed. Everyone had a smile on their face and was in a good mood. Even Josie,
who, poor thing, was a fussy baby and normally pretty difficult at this time of day, was making cute
sounds and noises as she enjoyed her bottle. The sweet mood changed when Kyle entered the scene
and cracked everybody up with a funny story about almost driving over Nathan’s foot with the golf
cart because he couldn’t figure out how to put it into reverse. They were all laughing hysterically at
his antics.

“And I can’t even blame it on drunk driving” he quipped and rolled his eyes.

Ali turned the camera back to her own face and quirked an eyebrow at her wife, wordlessly
reminding her what a bad driver her brother was and always had been.

“I never doubted you baby” Ashlyn laughed at their inside joke.

The rest of the group arrived piecemeal and it was time for Ali to get her little family ready for
dinner.

“I don’t want to, but I have to go get changed and get these nuggets dressed for dinner too” she said
sadly, looking directly into her phone. “I love you honey.”

“I love you too” Ashlyn replied shyly. “I can’t wait to see you tomorrow.”

“Me too babe. Call me tonight if you want. You know my schedule” she chuckled. “But only if
you’re up. Try and get some sleep. That’ll probably help your hip too.”

“I will. I promise. Have fun tonight with your hot young redhead” she giggled and made Ali laugh
too as they ended the call.

By the time Ashlyn, Whitney and Meg made it down to the wedding the next evening it was just
after 9:30pm. The party was being held in the big fancy ballroom of the enormous main building of
the resort. This huge building was also where most of the other guests were staying for the night, if
they were staying over. The party was in full swing and the big dance floor was full of laughing,
joyous faces and some questionable dance moves. The three latecomers stood in the doorway
scanning the room and trying to press out the wrinkles in their clothes with their hands. The 2-1/2
hour drive had not been kind to Whitney’s beautiful linen dress or Ashlyn’s tailored dress pants and
shirt. Meg looked cute as could be though. Her long, dark red hair fell around her face in tight,
natural curls and the pretty blue dress she wore made her legs look even longer than they really were.
She had gone through a growth spurt, even since she had last visited in February, and she was tall for
her age.

“Oh you’re here!” Deb exclaimed as she entered the room behind them, freshly returned from a trip
to the bathroom. “And don’t you all look so beautiful” she inhaled a big, dramatic breath as she took Meg’s hand and admired her dress and then hugged her hello.

Chris greeted them next and lifted each of them up in the air and twirled them around as he delivered his hugs and kisses. Meg he twirled around three times, making her squeal with delight.

“Uncle Chris!” she laughed as they twirled.

“Finally!” he said as he held her in his strong arms. There weren’t too many people who held her anymore because she was getting big and tall. “A good dance partner! I’ve been waiting and waiting for somebody good enough to get me out on that dance floor” he grinned at the 9-year old and she put her hand on his dimpled cheek. “Will you do me the great honor of dancing with me Miss Meg” he asked in a fancy voice and bowed his head down at the end of his invitation.

“Yes!” she giggled as he whisked her away without another word or glance at anybody else.

Deb led Ashlyn and Whitney over to the newlyweds and then they slowly greeted the rest of the family members. They spent almost 45 minutes hugging friends and family hello and Ashlyn was having a hard time focusing on the person she was hugging because she kept looking for her beautiful brunette. Ken returned from the bar with their drinks and that’s when she heard it. That short, loud, shout of a laugh carried over all the rest of the din and went right to Ashlyn’s heart with a jolt. The keeper turned quickly in the direction of the ocean-view patio doors and finally saw her wife coming back into the room with Sydney on her arm and a huge grin on her face. The two best friends were laughing about something and as they paused a few steps inside the room Ali turned her head and cast her eyes across the mass of bodies in the grand room. It didn’t take her long to meet the gaze of her keeper. A nose-crinkling grin spread across her face when she saw Ashlyn and her dimpled smile staring back at her. The blonde gave her a little half wave and then pointed her way as she excused herself from Ken and Whitney and started moving across the room. Whitney followed after Sydney waved her over too and playfully rolled her eyes.

Ali looked beautiful in a loose-fitting, sleeveless yellow sheath dress that was modestly cut and comfortable. If it were anybody other than her brother’s wedding she probably wouldn’t have attended because she wasn’t looking as good as she liked to for an event like this. She had been working out and her stomach was a little smaller but she had a long way to go still. She had to buy a new dress for the night and, as much as she loved shopping, it had depressed her. All of that was forgotten at the moment though, as she waited impatiently for the blonde to close the distance between them. Finally she was in Ashlyn’s arms, inhaling her scent and melting into her touch. The keeper embraced her wife and brought their lips together in a sweet, meaningful kiss that was way too chaste for either of their liking.

“Ow ow ow” Ali frowned and pulled back quickly.

Ashlyn released her as soon as she heard the second ‘ow’ and frowned back at her with concern.

“What’s the matter baby? Are you ok?”

Ali looked sheepishly at her wife and rolled her eyes with a frustrated sigh.

“I got a fucking sunburn this afternoon and it’s killing me.”

“Oh sweetheart” Ashlyn tried to keep a straight face but couldn’t suppress the giggle that slipped out.

“It’s not funny” the brunette shot back but then giggled herself. “It really hurts” she whined adorably.

“I’m sorry” the keeper replied sincerely and cupped her cheek. “Where can’t I touch?”
“My whole back.”

Ashlyn raised both eyebrows.

“Ok, well, that’s going to make dancing really tough. I’m good, but I’m not that good” she chuckled as she kissed Ali’s lips tenderly without touching any other part of her body.

“Come on” the brunette took her wife’s hand and led her to the dance floor. “Let’s try.”

The next few songs were, thankfully, slow and romantic ones and Ali wrapped her arms around Ashlyn’s neck and pulled herself in tight against her. The keeper finally found that if she rested her hands on the brunette’s hips and cheated them towards the front so only the tips of her fingers were near her back, they could make it work.

“It’s a shame” she shook her head and smirked down at her beautiful brunette. “There’s a whole lot of ass back there that just isn’t going to get any attention now.”

“Well I had a bathing suit on” Ali corrected. “My ass is about the only thing back there that’s not burned” she laughed and kissed her wife’s lips again.

“Well why didn’t you say so?” Ashlyn’s face lit up as she moved her hands to her wife’s backside and patted it lightly.

“Ashlyn” the brunette warned but couldn’t keep the giggle out of her voice for long.

“I’ll behave, I promise.”

They danced and enjoyed being in each other’s arms and then before they knew it the clock said 12am.

“Oh shit” Ashlyn gasped. “I’ve gotta get Meg to bed. Jesus Christ it’s midnight.”

“Babe” Ali laughed softly and tried to get her attention back as her head swiveled around, looking for Meg. “Hey, listen, Chris took her down to the cottage about an hour ago. She’s fine.”

“But who’s down at the cottage?”

“Your mom and Carol are babysitting tonight. We put all the kids to bed down there tonight and then Syd, Beth and I came back up. Everything’s good. Just relax.”

“You’re telling me that mom and Carol are down there with Johnny, Lizzy, Drew, Josie and Cash?”

“Well, they’re asleep silly.” Ali caressed her cheek and patted her chest comfortingly.

“You hope!” Ashlyn laughed and raised her eyebrows.

“Chris and Beth probably stayed down there when they brought Meg down” Ali countered. “There are plenty of hands on deck.”

They danced some more but Ashlyn was antsy and her wife could feel it. It was so rare, especially with Josie being so little, that they got to dress up and go dancing that Ali really wanted to make their night last. Ashlyn had only been there for a couple of hours anyway. But the more she thought about it from her keeper’s perspective the more she realized what was going on.

“You miss your kids, don’t you?” she asked quietly after kissing Ashlyn’s lips again.
“I haven’t seen them for eight days...”

“Come on, if we say our goodbyes fast enough you can give Josie her 1am bottle.”

As they crept through the cottage peeking into bedrooms to check on everybody, Ashlyn couldn’t contain the smile that spread across her face. She had been missing her family and now, here they all were, jammed into one big cottage together. She chuckled and Ali squeezed her hand and grinned at her. They had told each other stories about family vacations they had taken when they were kids and they always involved extra bodies and seemingly random sleeping arrangements. Both women were thinking the same happy thoughts as they moved from room to room. The first door they opened was Mike’s bedroom but Johnny and Cassius were asleep in the big double bed. Johnny had just turned four at the end of July and Cash would be turning four in just about a month. The next bedroom had their sweet boy Drew asleep in the big double bed and little Lizzy, just about a year and a half, was sleeping in the portable crib Ali had brought down with her. This would be where her dad would end up, Ashlyn thought as her smile continued to grow. Next they looked in on Meg who was also out like a light in another big double bed. She and Whitney would be sharing and the keeper felt a wave of love for her awesome best friend. Chris and Beth had a room as did Tammye and Carol. The light was on under the door and Ashlyn knocked ever so lightly.

Carol answered the door with her finger to her lips. She gave Ashlyn a big hug and spoke in a hushed whisper.

“Your mom’s sleeping.”

“How were they? Everybody stay asleep?” the blonde whispered back.

“Pretty good” Carol nodded. “The big boys took a little bit longer to fall asleep so we had to go in a couple of times and settle them down. Nothing like a day on the beach to wipe them out though” she chuckled. “Drew and Lizzy went right out and stayed that way.”

“How was Josie?” Ali asked, a little afraid of the answer. She was the fussiest of any of the babies in the family, by far. “Did she stay down?”

“She was just fine” Carol smiled. “Tammye fed her at 10pm and we read to her a little bit and then put her back down.”

“Well, I’ve got it from here” Ashlyn said. “Thank you so much for tonight.”

“Anytime honey. That’s what we’re here for” Carol smiled warmly at the younger women. “See you in the morning.”

As they turned to go into their own room, where Josie was asleep in her bassinette, they literally ran into Mike and had to stifle screams as they jumped and clutched at each other in fear.

“Shit!” Ashlyn whisper yelled as she grabbed her chest.

“Sorry ladies” Mike chuckled softly, keeping his voice low. “There was no good way to do that” he grinned. “Everything ok?”

“Yep, we just checked and everybody’s good” Ali answered, still a little breathless from the scare. “You might want to sleep with Drew though. You’ll have more room. Totally up to you though” she patted her father-in-law’s arm as they passed by each other in the hall. “Come get us if anybody needs anything.”

When they closed their bedroom door behind them Ali immediately asked her wife to help her out of
her dress. She knew they had a few minutes before Josie had to be fed and she had to get some relief from the dress on her sunburned skin.

“Holy shit Al, you poor thing” Ashlyn grimaced as she unhooked and unzipped her wife’s dress. “Your legs too. Damn baby.”

The entirety of Ali’s back, except for her ass, was bright red and radiating intense heat. It looked incredibly painful and the keeper felt so bad for her wife.

“Do you have something to put on it? Like aloe vera or anything?”

“Yeah, the spa sells some ridiculously expensive cream with seven different things that are all supposed to help.”

“Have you used it yet?” Ashlyn couldn’t help but joke as she felt like she was standing next to the sun itself.

“Ha ha, very funny” Ali winced as she took all of her clothes off and exhaled. She put her hair up in a loose bun and pulled on a huge, loose t-shirt that she had bought in the gift shop specifically so she could wear it over her sunburn that night. She stepped into a pair of Ashlyn’s sleep shorts and sighed. “You don’t mind, do you?” she looked over her shoulder at her wife. “I mean, you brought more than one pair right?”

“I don’t mind” the keeper smiled softly. “And yes I brought more than one pair.” She walked up behind Ali and carefully kissed the closest cheek. “Can you wait while I feed her and then I’ll rub that cream on for you?”

“Yeah, thanks honey” Ali turned and kissed her softly. “I’m so glad you’re here” she kissed her again, this time with a little heat. “I love you.”

The brunette fidgeted the whole time she sat with Ashlyn as she fed their daughter her bottle. Whitney came in and found them in the living room of the cottage a few minutes later.

“Oh my God, you guys missed the drag queens!” Whitney giggled as quietly as she could. “It was amazing. They did this song and dance and it was like the story of Kyle and Nathan but hysterical” she plopped down on the couch, more than a little drunk, and looked sideways at Ali. “What’s the matter with you? You look like you’re about to crawl out of your skin.”

“Ugh” Ali groaned. “I fell asleep at the beach this afternoon and burned the shit out of my back and legs” she replied quickly. “Please tell me somebody recorded the drag queens” she asked desperately. “I can’t believe we missed that.”

“I’m sorry baby” Ashlyn frowned. “We should have stayed.”

“No” the brunette shook her head and smiled. “We’re right where we should be” she patted her wife’s leg. “I’m just mad they waited so long to do the routine.”

“I’m sure someone recorded it” Whitney answered Ali’s previous question. “A room full of gay guys? I’ll be surprised if there aren’t a hundred different recordings with commentary and effects.”

They all laughed quietly as Ali continued to fuss and fidget. She had already gone back for the cream and slathered in onto her legs as she sat next to Ashlyn on the edge of the couch. But her back was driving her insane.

“She’s almost done honey” Ashlyn gave her wife a sympathetic look. “Then I’ll put that cream on
your back for you. Poor thing.”

“I’ll put it on for you” Whitney offered as she stood up. “Where is it?”

“Oh God Whit, don’t tease me” Ali groaned.

“I’m serious, unless you have a problem with it” she gave Ashlyn a weird, questioning look.

“Absolutely not” the keeper replied. “It’s right there on the coffee table. Thanks Whit.”

Ali wasted no time. She moved over to the love seat, lay down carefully on her stomach and pulled her huge shirt up off of her back and onto the back of her head.

“Holy shit Ali” Whitney exclaimed a little too loudly. “No wonder you can’t sit still.”

The law student began spreading the cream all over Ali’s back and shoulders. She moved her shorts down just enough so she could reach all of the burn.

“Your skin is, like, a thousand degrees.”

“I can feel the heat radiating off of it all the way over here” Ashlyn agreed with a chuckle.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, either of you” Ali said breathlessly. “But Whitney, I think I love you.”

After a few more minutes Ashlyn burped Josie and spent some time talking to her and snuggling with her while Whitney continued to tend to Ali’s sunburn.

“What’s going on?”

They all turned to see Meg standing there in her nightgown, rubbing her eyes and yawning.

“Hey Meggie” Ashlyn smiled at the little girl. “Are you ok? Why are you up?”

“I’m thirsty.”

“You can grab a bottle of water from the fridge if you want a cold one or there are room temperature ones just inside the door there, on the floor” Ali explained trying not to wince too much as she spoke.

Meg came back with two bottles and put the extra one on the coffee table as she sat on the couch next to Ashlyn and Josie.

“Meg, I’d like you to meet Josie” Ashlyn grinned. “Josie, this is Meg. She’s going to teach you all about being a big girl someday.”

Meg took another couple of drinks of water and leaned against Ashlyn’s shoulder as she stared at Josie.

“She has red hair like me” Meg said with wide eyes. “I never noticed that before.”

“It’s hard to see when we Facetime sometimes” the keeper agreed. “Yours is definitely darker red, like your mom’s. It’ll be interesting to see how her hair color changes as she gets bigger.”

“What’s that?” she pointed at Josie’s neck.

“That’s a birthmark. Like you know the little one you have on your stomach?”
“Yeah.”

“Well it’s the same thing, only Josie’s is a lot bigger.”

“It looks funny.”

“Most of us have a birthmark or a spot somewhere” Ashlyn patiently explained. “Hers is just in a much more visible spot.”

“And it’s really big.”

“Yep. I read about them after she was born because I had some questions and do you know what they call birthmarks like Josie’s sometimes?”

“What?”

“Giraffe spots.”

“Nuh-uh” Meg squinted, disbelievingly.

“It’s true” Ashlyn confirmed. “I think it’s really cute that Josie’s giraffe spot is on her neck. And giraffes are known for their big long necks.”

Ali and Whitney were both smiling as they listened to the keeper interact with her first best girl. Meg snuggled up closer to Ashlyn and peered at the baby girl in her arms. They were all quiet for a few minutes, the insanely late hour hitting everyone at the same time. Meg yawned and Whitney pronounced Ali’s back officially slathered and went into the kitchen to wash her hands.

“You need to go back to bed little miss” Ashlyn leaned over and kissed Meg on her head. “We’ve got lots of fun things to do tomorrow so we have to get our rest.”

“Ok” she grumbled but stood up without any further dispute. “So, why are you all up anyway?”

Whitney joined them again and held her hand out for Meg to take so they could walk to their room together.

“When you’re old like us and you have little babies to take care of this is what a fun Saturday night looks like” Ashlyn laughed and winked at Meg.
Sunday Funday

Sunday was one of those days that the whole family would remember for decades. It was supposed to be a fun day spent on the beach with all the grandparents and aunts and uncles around to help entertain the kids and keep them safe. It was supposed to be full of sandcastles and boogie boards and floaties and bathing suits. The genius plan that Ali and Beth and Sydney had come up with the night before, still in their party dresses, while they were putting their children to sleep, was supposed to go into effect in the early afternoon. They were going to watch each other’s kids so the tired moms and pregnant moms could get some naptime in during their long, vacation weekend. At that point they were so tired that they never even considered the possibility of sex. They just wanted to sleep.

Sydney had offered her cottage as the napping spot and they all went to bed later than usual that night, knowing they could get caught up with a nap that Sunday. Ha.

They had only been on the beach for an hour when the first rainstorm hit. Everyone ran back inside the big cottage to take shelter and wait for it to pass. By the time the second rainstorm soaked them all at 11am they were more aggravated than anything. The only activity that didn’t stop because of the rain was the beach soccer game that had been going on for almost an hour already. Whitney and Dom were playing against Koty and Tanner and it was a surprisingly even match. The chorus of complaints and questions about why they got to stay outside and play in the rain when the kids weren’t allowed to was loud and prolonged.

“Because I said so” Sydney finally answered her son, her voice frustrated and a little harsh. It worked. Cash shuffled away and sulked on one of the couches with his little arms folded across his chest. Sydney looked up sheepishly at her mom and then at Deb and then at Ali. Sandi and Deb had shit-eating grins on their faces but didn’t rub it in. You could see their vindication written all over their glib faces. Ali was trying hard to suppress a giggle but failed. She giggled with her head down as she finished putting dry clothes on Drew. “Oh zip it you” Sydney glared at her for a few seconds and then joined her. Before too long they were both laughing hysterically as were Sandi and Deb.

“Because I said so” they heard Beth say loudly from the other room and they all cracked up again, watching Johnny stomp through the living room to join Cash on the couch.

“Man I love being a Grandma” Deb laughed and wiped the happy tears off of her face.

The day really took a turn for the worse when the thunderstorms started rolling through in the early afternoon. They had just made their way back outside after lunch and had been playing for about an hour when the sky opened up and a huge bolt of lightning flashed across the water. Everyone scurried inside again, genuinely pissed off at that point. But there was no messing with thunder and lightning and they all knew it. Ali was going to nap with Drew over at Syd’s cottage and went back to the bedrooms to get his favorite stuffed shark and blanket. She could hear Beth calling Lizzy’s name and then heard Ashlyn walking behind her.

“Hey, have you seen Lizzy?” the keeper asked.

“I think she just went into your mom’s room” Ali replied as they both walked into Tammye’s room to look for the toddler.

Ashlyn could hear her on the other side of the bed but couldn’t see her. She was talking to herself and it sounded like she was turning pages in a book. The keeper walked around to pick the girl up and praise her for being a big girl and reading a book when she stopped in her tracks.

“Ummm, Al, will you come here please?”
“Is she reading to herself? How cute is that?” Ali enthused as she knelt on the bed and then crawled across it to look down at Lizzy on the floor on the other side of the bed. “What the hell is she reading Ashlyn?” her voice jumped an octave as she squeaked out the question and looked over her shoulder at the open door to the bedroom.

“I don’t know” Ashlyn swallowed hard. “I think she got it from my mom’s suitcase” she nodded next to the toddler at Tammye’s suitcase that was propped open against the wall.

“Well put it back” Ali whispered with urgency. “And hurry up. Someone will be in here looking for her any minute.”

Lizzy wailed when Ashlyn picked her up and put her on the bed, taking ‘The Whole Lesbian Sex Book’ out of her hands and trying to unbend the corners of some of the pages. Ali tried to soothe the little girl and got a swat for her troubles. Before she could get to the edge of the bed and stand up to carry the toddler out of the room, Carol had walked in.

“Yes Tam, she’s in here. We’ve got her” she called out over her shoulder as she walked further into the room.

As Carol approached the bed Ashlyn turned around looking guilty as sin and dropped the book on the bed like it was on fire.

“I found her in here reading to herself and I think I got most of the pages unbent” she explained quickly, looking down, embarrassed and blushing like crazy. She glanced at her wife, silently pleading with her not to leave the room yet. “I’m sorry Carol.”

It was Carol’s turn to blush, and blush she did. She was redder than the keeper was and that was really saying something.

“Oh, uh, that’s alright” she cleared her throat and smiled nervously at Ali who was holding Lizzy. “Um, your mother’s been, uh, reading and if you could just put that back into her suitcase there...”

“Oh, sure” Ashlyn turned around, happy to not have to look at the embarrassed woman for a few seconds. “I’ll put it back and I’ll just close this.”

“That’s a good idea” Carol bit her lip. “Why don’t I take this baby girl to her mama. I think it’s somebody’s nap time” she cooed at Lizzy and Ali handed the little girl over with an anxious smile.

Ten minutes after Ali lay down on Sydney’s bed with Drew, Ashlyn quietly opened the door. She felt awful about bothering her wife while she was trying to nap and she promised herself that if Ali was already asleep she would just let her be.

“What’s the matter?” the brunette whispered from the bed. She was curled up on her side with their son snuggled up against her chest and stomach. He was already out cold, exhausted from trying to keep up with the 4-year old boys all morning long. “Is Josie ok?”

“She’s fine. She’s with my dad. He won’t let her go for anything” she smiled as she whispered, but then her face got serious again.

“Ash, what’s up?”

“I can’t go in there right now” she finally breathed out, running her words together quickly as she stepped to the foot of the bed with wide eyes. “Please don’t make me go back in there yet. I can’t. I just don’t know what to say and I can’t stop thinking about it and ugh, God, I don’t want to think about it and I don’t know how I’m ever going to look either of them in the face ever again...”
“Come nap with us then” Ali smiled at her upset wife. It had taken her a minute to follow along with her words but she had finally understood the blonde’s predicament. “But they’re still going to be in our cottage when we get back there in a couple of hours you know.”

“I know” the keeper whined quietly as she lay down on the other side of Drew so she was facing her beautiful brunette.

“And she’s still going to be your mom and she’s still going to be with Carol.”

“I know” Ashlyn sighed and scrunched her face up for a minute. “It wouldn’t have been so bad if Carol hadn’t come in. I could have just dealt with it myself. But now she knows I know they’re reading that book and God... I’m so mad at the weather.”

Ali chuckled as she watched her wife struggle to process what had happened a half hour earlier in Tammye and Carol’s bedroom.

“I’m glad they’re reading it” she whispered. “I feel bad for them trying to figure out how to have good sex probably for the first time in their lives” she chuckled again. “I mean, I’m glad they’re trying to figure it out but I feel bad that they have to. They’ve both been straight their whole lives and, from what we know about Carol’s marriage, she sure didn’t have a good sex life. I don’t know about your mom...”

“God Al, really?” Ashlyn’s face contorted as if she was in physical pain. “That’s exactly the point. I don’t want to think about my mom’s sex life. Gross.”

“I don’t know” Ali said after a minute or two. “Maybe it’s because I didn’t have a really good sexual experience until I was almost 31 years old...”

“Are you serious right now?” Ashlyn dropped her jaw and looked pointedly at her wife.

“What?”

“I don’t want to think about your sex life with Sarah either” she rolled her eyes and then squeezed them shut as if trying to get an image out of her head.

“Listen Ashlyn, not everybody gets to figure out their sexuality in high school and then go to college and have all kinds of sex and learn the tricks when they’re 18 years old like you did” her eyes flashed with anger. “Or have some hot, older co-ed take them under her wing and teach them everything she knew about how to make love to a woman.” She paused and tried to relax. Ashlyn didn’t deserve to be attacked just because she was embarrassed about getting a glimpse into her mother’s sex practices. Ali took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’m sorry honey. I just...it’s harder and really awkward when you’re older and trying to figure things like that out. That’s all I’m trying to say.” She smiled at her wife who had finally opened her eyes again. “I’m sorry you’re upset about it. But I’m glad they’re trying to learn how to have good sex. I wish we could help them.”

“What does that even mean?” the keeper asked with a horrified look on her face.

“Calm down” Ali giggled and reached her legs out so they were in the middle of the bed. She stretched one all the way over to her wife’s shin and poked it with her toes. “I’m not saying we should or I’m going to. I just wish there was a way we could help them. What a gift that would be.”

Ashlyn exhaled and moved her legs to the middle of the bed and let the brunette intertwine them with her own. They were both quiet and Ali thought her keeper might have actually fallen asleep. It was so nice and quiet and Drew’s little breathing sounds were calming and peaceful. He was a little furnace when he slept, just like Ali was. She was just about to drift off to sleep when she heard her
wife’s voice again.

“I get what you’re saying. It’s gross when I think about it being my mom and her...lover” she struggled with the words and the thought. “But they don’t have a bunch of gay friends that they tell everything to. They’re not hanging out with their best friends sharing stories about the cool new thing they learned from their booty call the night before.”

Ali smiled as she listened to her kind-hearted wife talk. She had never known anyone more compassionate or empathetic.

“I don’t want to be those people for them, but maybe we can help them.”

“What are you thinking sweetheart?” the brunette asked encouragingly.

“I don’t know yet. Maybe it’s something as simple as putting a list of good lesbian movies and books together for them. Something like that.”

“That’s a good start” Ali nodded. “Have they ever been to Provincetown? I can’t remember all their day trips they’ve taken up here before.”

“No, I don’t think so. At least, not that they told me about.”

“Well, it’s too late this trip because they’re flying home tomorrow but next time they come visit we have to take them.” The brunette said it as if it were already an agreed upon fact. “And we should take them to a club in Melbourne Beach too. It’s scary to go someplace like that and not know what to expect or what to do. If we can sort of introduce them so they feel comfortable when they’re there with us then maybe they’ll go back on their own sometime too.”

“And there must be support groups for older lesbians, right?” Ashlyn asked, starting to get on board with this endeavor.

“I would think so. It’s probably just a matter of finding one that feels right to them.”

“Ok” the keeper nodded and smiled. “And we can just write out, like, the list and mail it to them. That way they can talk to us about it if they want to, or not talk to us about it if they don’t want to.”

Ali giggled softly and blinked at her wife.

“Alright babe. Now can we please take a nap? I’m soooooo tired.”

It poured rain all afternoon and well into the evening. Kyle and Nathan came down to hang out for a couple of hours before leaving on their honeymoon. They were going to a gay resort in Belize for two weeks and couldn’t wait to get started with their married life. Ken, Kyle, Mike Harris and Chris walked down to the restaurant on the pier to pick up all the take-out food they had ordered for dinner back at the big cottage. Mike and Ken both tried to pay for the food and Kyle and Chris looked nervously at each other as the tension rose. The four of them stood there dumbfounded when the waiter handed over their bags of food and thanked them for the generous tip. Kyle asked him to explain, wanting to make sure there hadn’t been a mistake. The waiter looked at the order note and told them that a Michael Christopher had called over and paid for it already.

The din that emanated from the cottage as they approached it with their bags of food made Kyle groan and Chris chuckle.

“Oh you just wait until your kids are part of that racket” the big man grinned. “You’ll have a headache, but your heart will feel like it’s going to burst.”
Ken and Mike Harris looked knowingly at each other as they opened the door to the riot that awaited them. It was a spectacle. Every pillow in the large living room had been used to build two small forts that were clearly at war with each other. Socks, balled up, were being thrown back and forth along with the occasional stuffed animal as the war raged on. Ashlyn, Koty, Meg and Lizzy were in one fort and Whitney, Tanner, Johnny, Drew and Cash were in the other. Ali sat on the cushionless couch, feeding Josie, with Sydney, Dom, Beth and Mike Christopher who were all batting errant projectiles away from the baby and shuttling them back into play. The Grandmas were all in the kitchen drinking wine and setting the dining room table so they would all be able to sit down and eat. Nathan walked around the perimeter of the skirmish to help with the bags of food and took a direct hit in his groin from Drew’s stuffed shark. He groaned loudly and doubled over in pain.

“Hey!” Kyle yelled. “Who threw that?” he looked menacingly at the occupants of both forts and knew immediately who the guilty party was by the guilty look on their face. He handed the bag he was carrying to his mother and ran towards Ashlyn. “I have plans for those jewels missy. You can’t be breaking them on me now!”

“Save the children!” Ashlyn yelled when she realized her brother-in-law wasn’t going to pull up.

Koty picked up Lizzy and put his forearm out to block Kyle’s foot away from Meg’s head as he dove through the cushions and into Ashlyn. Everyone held their breath for a second until they heard his laughter and her dramatic pleas for help.

“Get him! Please, hit him with everything you’ve got!” the keeper called out and then giggled as everybody threw whatever they had left at the newlywed.

Kyle moved one of the cushions so he could see Ashlyn’s face and he winked at her. They started wrestling around, rolling towards the middle of the room as all the kids watched with wide eyes and grins on their faces. Kyle pinned her, sitting on her hips and holding her hands above her head with one hand while he tickled her with his other hand.

“No!” she yelled. “Not death by tickling! Anything but that! Help me! Somebody please help me!”

Kyle was attacked instantly by every rugrat in the room, including Lizzy who reached out and smacked his foot from the safety of Koty’s arms. The 4-year olds eagerly climbed on Kyle and tried to pull him off. Meg joined in and put him in a choke hold while Drew tried to pry his hand off of his mama’s. The whole thing devolved into one big pig pile of laughter after a few minutes.

“Come on now everybody” Tammye called out loudly from the doorway to the dining room. “It’s time to eat. Wash your hands and come sit down now.”

Chris, Ken and Mike Harris were standing there watching and grinning.

“Christopher” Tammye gave her son a look. “Break that up, will you?”

Chris started stomping towards the pigpile like Frankenstein’s monster with his arms out, groaning loudly. When he got there he plucked one kid at a time off of the pile and tossed them to a waiting receiver while the kid squealed with delight. He picked up Drew first and tossed him to Ken. Then it was Johnny who landed in his Grandfather’s arms. The 4-year olds eagerly climbed on Kyle and tried to pull him off. Meg joined in and put him in a choke hold while Drew tried to pry his hand off of his mama’s. The whole thing devolved into one big pig pile of laughter after a few minutes.

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“Come on now everybody” Tammye called out loudly from the doorway to the dining room. “It’s time to eat. Wash your hands and come sit down now.”
“Sorry about your boy’s toys” she chuckled. “That sucks.”

“Yeah, you’d better hope that’s all it takes” Kyle sassed back as he helped her to her feet and smacked her on the butt.

He went to check on his husband’s injury and Ashlyn looked over at her wife, sitting quietly on the now deserted couch with their daughter asleep on her lap. The keeper went and sat next to her, putting her arm around her shoulders until she winced and Ashlyn remembered her painful sunburn. She settled for patting her leg and kissing her cheek instead.

“You look beautiful sitting over here with your hot, young redhead” she murmured against Ali’s cheek and then kissed it again.

“Did you have fun?”

“How could battling forts not be fun?” the keeper asked with a grin and a wink. “That was an epic battle.”

Josie was asleep on Ali’s legs, her head near the brunette’s knees and her feet near Ali’s belly. They watched her for a minute and just as the keeper was about to get up and put the living room back together she heard a giggle.

“Did she just...”

“Yep” Ali replied with a big grin of her own.

Josie was the most difficult baby in their world, including both friends and family. She was fussy and cranky and gassy and she cried a lot. She was the baby who needed to have her face put in the cold air from the freezer every once in a while when she couldn’t calm down after crying. She didn’t sleep well. She was the baby who seemed to have a little bit of a cold almost every day. She often had a worried or anxious look on her face. Ashlyn called it her ‘old lady’ face. She was the baby who didn’t always want to eat when it was time for her to eat. And that was a big deal because she needed the augmented formula to take care of the last bit of anemia she was trying to overcome. She needed to eat to keep her weight up so she could grow and thrive. She wasn’t in danger or anything. She was a perfectly healthy baby. She just wasn’t having a lot of fun yet. It was understandable once you knew what a struggle it had been for the poor thing as she tried to grow in the womb. Nobody would ever know just how difficult it had been for her.

But as she was growing now and getting stronger and maybe feeling a little bit safer and more comfortable with her new life, she began giggling in her sleep. It was the most adorable thing Ali had ever heard and when she told Ashlyn about it the keeper almost didn’t believe her. How could such a fussy baby giggle in her sleep? She had just started doing it while Ashlyn was away on her double road trip with the Breakers so the keeper hadn’t had a chance to hear it herself yet. She reached for Ali’s phone on the coffee table so she could record it if it happened again. It took five separate starts and stops with the recording until Josie did it again.

“I think that’s the most beautiful sound I’ve ever heard” Ashlyn said, fighting back tears of pure happiness.

“Your mom says she’s a happy baby on the inside and this is all the proof we’ll ever need” the brunette explained. “Isn’t that the sweetest?”

“I love it. And I love you my giggly girl.”

//
The big old house felt empty when they got home Monday afternoon. The entire Harris clan, including Tammye and Carol, got dropped off at the airport on their way from Cape Cod back up to Gloucester. Kyle and Nathan were on their honeymoon. And Deb and Mike were staying at the fancy resort for the week. Deb would be back Saturday afternoon for one final week before going home to Miami and getting ready for school. It was a bumpy evening as they tried to get Drew back to his nighttime routine. After three nights away from home and being excited by his cousins and Cash, it was a struggle. It took Ashlyn almost an extra hour to put him down and get him to stay in his bed. Meg waited patiently down in the living room with a dog on either side of her on the couch. She looked about as happy as Ali had seen her in the three days she had been with them.

“What a weekend huh Meg?” the brunette asked as she sat up on the floor and lifted Josie off of her tummy time blanket and into her arms. “Did you have fun or was it too many people and too many new faces?”

“It was fun” she shrugged as she patted both dogs at the same time. “Except for the rain.”

“Yeah, that was a pain. But you can go to the beach up here now, with Ashlyn, every day after training. That’ll be fun, won’t it?”

“Yup” she smiled at the brunette.

Ali smiled back and carefully got up off the floor with Josie and sat on the couch. She propped the baby girl up next to Fred and talked to her about doggies and encouraged her to pat Fred gently. Josie just looked up at her with her slight frown that seemed to be permanently etched on her face. Meg touched the baby on her arm and showed her how to pat the dog.

“See, like this” she demonstrated.

“That’s right. Great job Meg” Ali praised her. “Meg’s going to teach you all kinds of important things as you get bigger. You’re pretty lucky, little one” she cooed at the baby and smiled again at Meg.

“Like a big sister” the nine-year old said and watched Ali for her reaction.

“That’s right. Like a big sister.”

“But I’m not really her sister though, right?” Meg looked expectantly at Ali.

Why was Ali always the one who got these hard conversations with sweet Meg? Fuck. Where was Ashlyn? Ali didn’t know what to say and she didn’t know if Ashlyn and Hannah had agreed on anything to say or not say so she was completely flying blind.

“Well, not technically, no” the brunette began cautiously. “But you kind of are, right? I mean, when you’re here with us you definitely are her big sister, and Drew’s too.” She was starting to panic. What had she just said? Did it even make any sense? Ali flashed back to some of her old sales training. If you weren’t sure how to answer the question, ask more questions. “Do you feel like her big sister?”

“Yup, especially when I’m here.”

“Do you like being her big sister?”

“Yup” she nodded and then looked at her lap shyly. “But I’m not your daughter so how can I be their big sister?”
They had never talked about this before. Meg had always been comfortable and confident with Ashlyn and Ali and had never needed to have a label put on their unique little family. They had always treated her like their daughter and Ali was sure the little girl had felt that. It was a big part of the reason she kept coming back to spend time with them. Ali wondered what had changed to make her start questioning everything now.

“These are good questions Meg and I’m not sure I have good enough answers for you, but I’ll try” the brunette watched the girl’s face carefully as she continued talking. “Technically you’re not Ashlyn’s daughter because your mommy had you before she ever met Ashlyn. Does that make sense?”

“Kind of” she shrugged.

“Well the important thing to remember is that Ashlyn wanted to be a mommy to you too. She chose to be like your mommy because she loved you very much as soon as she met you. Do you remember when you were little and Ashlyn used to live with you?”

“Yup, she used to make us breakfast every day and sing songs in the kitchen.”

“She still does that doesn’t she?” Ali chuckled and was relieved when Meg smiled back at her. “We’ve never talked about this before, it’s ok that we’re talking about it now and I’m glad you asked honey. But what made you start thinking about it now?”

“She was an older lady at the party said I wasn’t your real daughter and then she said that I was just confused” the little girl explained glumly.

“Oh, I see. Did this lady say anything else?”

“Um, she said she didn’t know what kind of mother let her daughter keep doing this.”

“Doing what exactly? Did she say?”

“Nope. She said doing this after all these years. That’s what she said.”

“Well I don’t know who this lady was but I don’t think she knows what she’s talking about...”

“She was at your wedding too. She’s not very nice though. I don’t like her.”

Ali’s blood was boiling and it took all of her willpower not to call her stupid cow of an aunt Becky right that minute and let her have it. Fucking bitch.

“I’m sorry Meg” Ali squeezed her arm on top of Fred’s back. “She shouldn’t have been talking to you about this anyway. It’s none of her business.”

“She wasn’t talking to me, she was talking to some younger ladies.”

“She still shouldn’t have been talking about it at all because it’s none of her business and, most importantly, she doesn’t know what she’s talking about. How can she know how much you love Ashlyn or how much Ashlyn loves you? And that’s all it takes to be a family Meg. If you love somebody and you want to take care of them and help them be happy and live a good life, then you’re family. At least that’s how we do it in this family.”

“Are you like my mom too?” she asked shyly.

“Well I love you just as much as I love Josie and Drew and I love taking care of you and making you
Ali hadn’t realized it until she heard the words come out of her mouth, but she really did love Meg like one of her own. She had no idea where this conversation was going to lead them, ultimately, but she had always promised Meg that she would be honest with her. She couldn’t stop now.

“Um, yeah?” the little girl answered as more of a question.

“Does it feel like I’m like your mom when you’re here?”

“Yeah. It does.”

“It feels that way to me too sweetheart” Ali smiled warmly at Meg. “It doesn’t really matter what we call each other as long as you know that we’ll always be here for you and that we love you like our daughter. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“And don’t even think about what that old lady said again. She’s not very smart and she’s not very nice and, honestly, I really don’t like her very much either” Ali confessed. “I think Fred’s nicer and smarter than her and I’d rather talk to him than to her any day.”

Meg giggled, leaned over and hugged the caramel colored dog and then kissed him for good measure. She looked up at Ali with eyes full of trust and love and the brunette’s breath hitched.

“I love you Meg and I’m so glad you’re here” she beamed at the little girl.

“Me too.”

The rest of the week went surprisingly well, considering it was the first time Ali and Ashlyn had been completely alone with their two children. Meg turned out to be a big help, entertaining Josie while one of her moms got her bottle ready, or playing with Drew or even just letting the dogs in or out the side door of the family room. They missed Deb like crazy, but everybody was alive and well when Grandma and Mike pulled into the driveway late Saturday morning. The Breakers had a 4pm game that day and Ashlyn was getting the start. Everybody was going and Deb and Mike wanted to make sure they were home in time to help. The kitchen wasn’t as clean as it usually was and there were piles of laundry in the nook that needed folding, but, all in all, the two women were pleased with how well they had survived the week.

“Well it’s not like we’re idiots” Ashlyn said Saturday morning as she finished washing the breakfast dishes.

“No, but, I don’t know...maybe it was just me. But I’ve been nervous about this week since Mike told me his plans.” Ali chuckled as she got Josie’s diaper bag all packed up for their big day. It was going to be her first game and between that and having Meg walk out with her for the pre-game pomp and circumstance, Ashlyn was about to jump out of her skin with excitement. “But we did it and I’m relieved and happy. That’s all.”

“Yeah we did” the keeper met her wife in the middle of the kitchen and wrapped her in a hug.

She pulled back and gave Ali a soft, deep kiss, grateful for the moment of privacy and quiet. They
were missing each other. They had reconnected at the Beauport Hotel, then Ashlyn went away for eight days, then they spent two nights together in a cottage full of people. Drew had been difficult about going to bed their first two nights back at home and Meg was there and had a later bedtime which led to late nights for both Ali and Ashlyn. Finally, on Thursday evening, Ashlyn came down the backstairs after tucking Meg in and reading with her, and found her wife folding clothes at the nook table. Josie’s schedule had been changed so she needed to be fed every four hours now instead of three. If her anemia continued to improve and she kept getting bigger then, in another month, it would increase again to five hours. The keeper hugged her beautiful brunette from behind and placed a warm kiss to her neck as she pressed her entire body into her back and ass and thighs.

“Mmmmm” Ali hummed and leaned back into her keeper’s strong body.

“Come on” Ashlyn took the crib sheet out of her hand and put it back in the laundry basket on the banquette seat. She held Ali’s hand and led her towards the backstairs with a lascivious grin on her face.

“But...”

“Baby, the laundry can wait. We have two hours before Josie needs to be fed. Drew and Meg are already asleep. And the dogs won’t miss us for an hour’’ she smirked as they started to climb the stairs, still holding hands.

Ali had hesitated for only a moment longer, before letting her desire push her exhaustion and responsibilities aside. She reached out in front of her and grabbed the blonde’s ass, squeezing it and then caressing it.

“Well hurry up” she giggled and smacked her wife’s ass, loving the idea more and more. “I can’t wait.”

And now it was Saturday already as they kissed in the temporarily kid-free kitchen. They were both looking forward to spending all of Sunday on the beach and Ali just hoped her keeper didn’t get too banged up in the game that day. She knew Ashlyn would spend the whole day playing with Meg and Drew in the ocean whether it caused her pain or not. The brunette said another silent prayer for an injury-free game. They were still alone and couldn’t believe their luck so they shared another long and slow kiss before Meg’s voice rang out from the living room.

“They’re here!”

Two hours later, after lunch and Ashlyn and Meg’s departure for the stadium, Ali and her mom were folding those piles of clothes in the nook while Mike, Drew and Josie all slept. Deb looked ten years younger, and a lot darker too. The Italian genes she shared with her daughter definitely made them both tan easily.

“So I hear you had a little chat with Aunt Becky” Deb stated evenly, not taking her eyes off of the tiny shirt she was folding.

“Did she call you?” Ali asked quietly, looking up sheepishly at her mother.

“No, your father did.”

“I’m sorry mom, but I just couldn’t believe she could be such a bitch. You should have seen how upset Meg was. And there’s no reason for it except that that horrible woman can’t keep her awful thoughts to her damned self. She’s just lucky I didn’t hear her that night or there would have been one hell of a scene. And I know Kyle would have been fine with it if it meant Aunt Becky finally
“went down.” She took a breath for the first time after speaking quickly and passionately, her eyes ablaze and the color rising up her cheeks. “I’m sorry mom.”

“Well I’m not” Deb said just as evenly as before, still folding clothes. “I think you’ve been very patient with her for a long time and I honestly don’t know how you’ve done it.” She glanced at her daughter who was standing with her jaw on the floor. “She’s lucky Ashlyn or I didn’t hear her because we would not have been nearly as nice as you were” she chuckled.

“So, you’re not mad?” Ali asked, tilting her head and trying to make sure she was understanding the situation correctly.

“No, and neither is your father. Scott called him to complain and he told him, basically, that if Becky didn’t want to get phone calls like that then she should keep her terrible opinions to herself more often.”

“He did not” Ali gasped.

“He did” Deb smiled brightly, proud of both her daughter and her ex-husband.

“But I feel terrible if he and Uncle Scott are fighting...”

“They’re not honey. I assure you. Scott knows who he’s married to. There’s a reason their kids aren’t all like their mother.” Deb grinned. “Next time you might want to give your dad a heads up though. Just so he’s prepared.”

“Yeah, that would have been a good idea. I’ll apologize to him today at the game. And I should probably call Rach and Viv too” the brunette made a mental note to do that at some point tomorrow.

“So is Meg ok now?”

“I think so. She’s always known she was safe and loved and part of the family here. It just never occurred to her to think otherwise. I had an incredibly awkward conversation with her Monday night and then Ash talked to her about it on their way to training Tuesday morning. She and Hannah are going to talk and figure out what to do. Ash thinks she just wants to put names to things. She’s nine and her friends at school talk about their families and stuff and Meg doesn’t really know what to call us.”

“That makes a lot of sense” Deb nodded thoughtfully. “She’s a lucky little girl and I think she knows that.”

“You should have seen how cute she was when she tried to teach Josie how to pat Fred” Ali smiled her nose-wrinkling grin. “She wasn’t quite old enough to get it with Drew. And maybe there’s something about having a little red-headed baby sister that means more to her. I don’t know” Ali smiled again. “But it was super cute.”

“She’s an easy kid to love” Deb agreed.

“I often wonder how important Ash staying in her life was for Meg. We’ll never know unless she tells us someday. But, I thought Ash was being a little dramatic about not wanting her to feel like the people in her life would just leave her. I could never understand that because it wasn’t my experience. I really thought Meg would be fine either way, no offense to my wife.”

“And now?”

“I don’t know” Ali chewed her bottom lip as she thought a minute. “Maybe part of the reason Meg is
such a good kid is because Ashlyn stuck with her. She’s always been there for her, she still writes to her every week. Even when other things in her life changed she always had Ash. It just feels like she was right all along and the rest of us are just now catching up.”

“Sounds about right to me” Deb smiled. “She’s got a wonderful instinct about what the people around her need. It’s a real gift.”
The Accident

Chapter Notes

A little bit of catching up on things and then a little bit more drama...

The Breakers had gone 3-1-1 in the month of August, finishing the month strong with three wins in a row. Everyone was pretty pleased with the results. They let that one loss motivate them even further. They had to get a result every game, at least one point. What if it came down to one point? That became the rallying cry for the last month of the regular season. There were four games left in September with a one-week FIFA break in the middle of the month. The Breakers had a shot at the fourth playoff spot, even with their 11-9-2 record at the end of August. They had 35 points and were in 6th place in the table. The LA Strikers and the Chicago Red Stars were duking it out for first place, only a couple of points separating them. And then the Portland Thorns were holding steady in 3rd place. It didn’t seem likely that they would catch either the Strikers or the Red Stars but nobody ever counted them out. And the Orlando Pride and North Carolina Courage held the 4th and 5th spots in the table, just ahead of the Breakers. It was going to be a real battle for the fourth playoff spot and Boston was determined to win it.

Deb and Meg had both gone home at the end of August and September kept right on rolling. Drew went back to his daycare in Lynnfield and loved it. Josie turned three months old and they were able to change her feedings to every five hours. As she got stronger and bigger, which was a very slow process, she started to get a little happier too. Her hair stayed orange and her face stayed mostly serious, but she started giggling when she was awake sometimes instead of just when she was asleep.Baby steps. The change to Josie’s schedule meant a little bit more sleep for Ali. Josie’s last bottle was at 10pm and then she didn’t get another one until 3am and then again at 7am when the rest of the family started their day. Ali and Ashlyn went back to what had worked with Drew before. Ali would go to bed early, around 9pm, and Ashlyn would feed Josie her 10pm bottle. Then Ali would get up for the 3am bottle which gave her about six hours of sleep, plus the three more hours before officially getting up at 7am. And that was assuming Josie stayed asleep, which was a rarity. She wasn’t a great sleeper. Ali was often up two or three times at night to soothe her fussy baby girl. They were flexible though, as always. And if Ali stayed up to finish some chores or do some work or just have some time with her wife to watch some shows and relax, Ashlyn would turn her alarm off and let her sleep through the 7am feeding. That was tricky though because Drew was up then too and breakfast time was busy and important and it always went better with both moms in the kitchen.

Ali’s body was gradually coming back to her as well. She took her time and chipped away at it. She still felt a pang at her incision every now and then. It didn’t really hurt. It was more of a shock, zapping her and then disappearing immediately afterwards. Ali had one month of maternity leave left before she started working from home part-time again in October. She had been constantly checking in with Marcy and Jared and monitoring the reports and executive communications that went out among the shareholders. She felt good about the way things were going at Knight-Harris so far that summer, but she hadn’t had to do very much besides mediating a couple of disputes between two of her agents over a few clients. One month left. Ali vowed to make time to enjoy it. And it was a new experience being home alone with Josie. It was special bonding time that the brunette didn’t realize she had been missing until the first day it happened. It was shaping up to be a pretty terrific month for mother and daughter.
Ashlyn continued working with Mattie but changed from twice a week to once a week because her schedule just got too busy. She had made good progress and could feel the positive results every day. She knew she was on the right track and would make sure she kept doing her exercises to keep the nightmares at bay. It had been almost a month since she had last had one. Something Mattie had said to her really rang true.

“You have a big heart and a vivid imagination Ashlyn. Those are both wonderful things and they are a big part of what makes you who you are. But they also open you up to certain... dangers. You feel more than most people do so those dangers end up hurting you more as well.”

“What kind of dangers?”

“The nightmares are a good example. Your imagination gets spurred on by many of the extra feelings your big heart feels. It’s like the perfect storm and it makes you susceptible to nightmares and other things that might not really be there. I think it also adds to your periodic depression.”

“And doing these exercises and using these techniques will help me remember what’s real and what’s not?”

“Yes. In a nutshell anyway. You have to learn to control your imagination when it runs away on you. You need to be able to rein it in and control it with your mind. That’s what will keep you with the straight and true. Eventually, once you’ve practiced enough, your mind will start to do it on its’ own.”

Whitney’s law school courses intensified and she hit the books hard, eager to get ahead and stay ahead now that she was in her second full semester. She had taken classes in the summer term as well, all part of her plan to get her degree in three years. Kyle Krieger was on a similar accelerated schedule for his film school. He expected to get his degree in May of 2023 and was working hard to get there. He and Nathan came home from their honeymoon and were happier than ever. Sydney went back to work, school, at seven months pregnant and Cash went to preschool. It was a big deal and they had a little party to commemorate the occasion and help get the little boy ready for his first big step forward in life. Drew missed his buddy at daycare but Ali and Sydney continued getting together an afternoon a week at Sydney’s new house in Lynnfield so the boys played together while the besties caught up.

Ashlyn and Ali continued to make time for each other as their little family adjusted to their latest new reality. It wasn’t always pretty but they did it. They tried to make nap time a thing whenever they could. If they were both going to be home in the afternoon they made plans to nap together while Drew and Josie were both down. It wasn’t as long as earlier in the summer because Deb wasn’t there to watch Josie. The three-month old napped more frequently and for shorter periods of time than her big brother. If they were lucky, they would get 90 minutes together in their bedroom, which they were very creative with. Sometimes they had sex and enjoyed the hell out of each other, connecting in the primal way that their bodies and souls needed despite how tired they were. Sometimes they folded laundry on the bed and talked. Sometimes Ali gave her wife one of her strong sports massages to help ease her aching muscles after a morning training session or before a travel day. Sometimes they broke Ali’s rule and turned the tv on and caught up on one of their shows, snuggled up together and breathing each other in. Sometimes Ashlyn would get Josie after she woke up and bring her back to their bedroom to finish Drew’s longer nap together. It was a sweet way to bond with their beautiful girl and she genuinely seemed to enjoy the quality time with her two moms.

The date night group, Syd, Dom, Niki and Molly, pushed hard to get Ali and Ashlyn to join them again in September but it was just too early. They appreciated the push, they really did, but they didn’t feel like they or Josie were ready. They also didn’t feel like it was fair to expect one of the
other couples to have to take care of fussy Josie while they already had four other rugrats to keep their eyes on. Ashlyn optimistically promised the group that they would participate in October, as the couple that stayed at home at the very least.

They should have known. It was just like back when they started to feel like they knew what they were doing as first-time moms with Drew. As soon as they had gotten a little bit of confidence, the shit had hit the fan just to remind them that parenting and life were fucking hard. This year was, unfortunately, no different. It was Ashlyn’s off-week. The Breakers had won their first two games of the month and looked good doing it. Ashlyn had played well as they won the first game away in Vancouver and Abby Smith had done just as well when they beat Chicago at home the week after. Their last three games were home games which was a terrific advantage for them and they didn’t want to squander any points at home. After the FIFA break Ashlyn would get the start against North Carolina, who they were chasing up the table, and then Abby would close out the season against Kansas City.

The blonde hadn’t been happier in weeks. The team was starting to come together, finally. Her family life had been going really well for the past three weeks and was getting better every day. She hadn’t had a nightmare in a month and could feel her body and mind starting to come back together for her. Everything was going well and she felt incredibly optimistic. The FIFA break was happening at a great time so the team could heal up a couple of knocks and get some rest and relaxation before their big push for the final two games that would literally make or break their season.

It was early Tuesday afternoon and Ashlyn was walking with Drew down the sidewalk outside of the Museum of Science in Boston, right across the Charles River from Cambridge. She had taken him on a special mama and Drew day and they had just spent the entire morning, including lunch, at the museum and were on their way back to their car. The Knight-Harris offices were just down the street about ten blocks and it was an easy walk. Ashlyn had parked there so she didn’t have to pay the exorbitant parking rates that the museum garage charged. The street right outside the museum was very busy as it led hundreds of vehicles to the on-ramps to the major highway that was nearby. But once they had crossed over the Charles River and taken a left it was a slightly quieter section of roadway. This was the stretch of road with the high-end condominium buildings and the nice restaurants along the river. The K-H building was about a fifteen-minute walk and the keeper thought it would be good for them both to stretch their legs. She was also hoping it would tire her son out so that he would fall asleep in the car and start napping close to his scheduled nap time. They had spent longer at the dinosaur exhibit than the blonde expected. She didn’t really think her almost 2-1/2 year old son would be that interested but he loved it. They had originally planned to go into the Children’s Museum but it was farther into the city and harder to get to so Ashlyn changed plans at the last minute. She didn’t want to waste time sitting in traffic when she could be exploring with her boy. She thought about bringing all four of them back to the Children’s Museum later in the week. Ali would love that idea.

It was drizzling as they walked across the busy bridge to the Cambridge side of the Charles River but it was also in the 80s so the light rain felt good. Drew held his mama’s hand and looked up at her as they walked and talked. Ashlyn kept him on her left side, away from the busy street with all the traffic. They turned left and continued to walk and talk. The keeper laughed to herself as Drew tried to say the names of some of the dinosaurs they had seen.

“Those are really hard names to say buddy, it’s ok if you can’t say them yet. Lots of grown-ups can’t say them either” she reassured when he got frustrated trying to say Tyrannosaurus Rex. “You can say ‘T-Rex’ for that one if you want.”

“T...wex” he tried but still had difficulty with his Rs. He grinned up at Ashlyn to see how he had
“Good job little man!”

There were two lanes of traffic heading East and two lanes of traffic heading their way, West, with a concrete divider running between the two directions. They were walking on the left side of the road so the Eastbound traffic was coming towards them. There were breaks in the concrete divider for cars to turn every two or three blocks and a couple of intersections with stoplights and crosswalks as well. There were lots of people out either heading to or from the Museum or walking to or from Kendall Square which was a little ways past the K-H building. When they got about half way there Drew got tired of walking and Ashlyn picked him up and put him on her back. They caught up to a man with two little girls as they walked in the same direction. He had one of their small hands in each of his and he looked nervously at the traffic and seemed to be considering crossing the busy street without waiting until they got to the crosswalk just ahead.

“There’s a crosswalk right up here” Ashlyn offered as she smiled at the girl closest to her.

The man turned his head to look at the keeper and then looked ahead about a block trying to see the crosswalk. The girl next to Ashlyn said something to the other girl who looked to be a little bit older and they both looked up at the blonde with curious eyes. The younger girl, who looked about seven or so, tugged on the man’s hand and said something to him in a language Ashlyn didn’t understand. He scowled down at her and spoke sternly in the same language, jerking her arm closer to him. He looked almost frantically up and down the street and really seemed to be upset.

“Hey” Ashlyn reached out and touched his arm to get his attention. She waited until he turned to look at her and then spoke again. “Are you lost?”

The man looked confused and then, after the older girl spoke to him in the Eastern European sounding language, a little relieved.

“Ya, lost” he copied the word she had just said and pulled the two girls to a stop and faced them all towards the keeper. He smiled sheepishly and nodded his head at Ashlyn. “Lech-mere” he sounded out as clearly as he could.

“Ok, are you looking for the train? The subway?” Ashlyn spoke slowly and clearly as Drew leaned his head sideways against her back and sighed contentedly. He seemed perfectly happy to be right where he was.

The man looked at the older girl and she translated for him.

“Ya. Sub-way” he nodded again.

Ashlyn looked at the older girl.

“Do you speak English” she asked hopefully as she smiled at the girl.

“Yeah” she replied and looked at the man.

“Can I talk to you? It might be easier.”

The older girl, who looked about nine or ten, spoke to the man who quickly scanned Ashlyn up and down before nodding his head at the girl.

“Yeah, he says it’s ok” she smiled shyly.
“Ok cool. My name’s Ashlyn” she smiled again. “Is this your father?”

“Yes, and my sister. We’re meeting my mom.”

After a lengthy conversation, Ashlyn found out that they were meeting their mom, after her work shift, at the Museum of Science and had taken a wrong turn. Anna and Lena lived with their mom in Somerville and their father had just moved to the U.S. to join them after years of being separated. The dad was trying to get back to the Lechmere subway station, where they had started walking from, so they could begin again with the walking instructions their mom had given them. They were closer to the museum than they were to the subway station and Ashlyn explained that to them and gave them directions to the museum instead. She showed the man the back of her hand with the museum stamp still on it to help prove that she was giving him good advice and knew what she was talking about. The older girl helped the keeper convince him that she was telling the truth and Ashlyn drew a little map for him with one of Drew’s crayons on the other side of the directions his wife had written out for him. It really couldn’t be any simpler. You could see the museum from where they stood if you looked between the condominium buildings and knew what you were looking for. Just as they were finishing up the girl mustered up her courage and asked the question she had been dying to ask for the whole thirty minutes they had been talking.

“Um, are you Ashlyn Harris...the soccer player?” she asked, her voice quieter than it had been and her cheeks a little pink.

“I am” Ashlyn grinned. “Do you play soccer?”

“Yes, we both do” she looked at her sister who was even more excited and shy than she was. “The Breakers are our favorite team. And you’re her favorite player.”

The younger girl blushed deep red and tried to hide behind her father’s leg as Ashlyn, with Drew still on her back, knelt down in front of them.

“Well it’s very nice to meet you Lena” the keeper shook the younger girl’s hand. “Would you and your sister like to come to the big game next weekend?”

“The Kansas City game?” Lena finally spoke, her eyes wide.

“That’s the one” Ashlyn chuckled and reached into her backpack, which she was wearing on her front because Drew was on her back. She handed each of them one of her K-H business cards. “Tell your mom to call me later this week if you want to come to the game. I’ll get you in, no charge.”

The girls squealed as Ashlyn stood up, grunting a little because of all the extra weight she was carrying.

“The only rule is you have to cheer really loud for us and you have to wear your Breakers gear. Can you do that?”

Both girls looked down sadly and Lena looked like she was about to cry any second.

“We...we don’t have any Breakers gear” Anna finally admitted in an embarrassed whisper.

Ashlyn felt her heart clench as she took in the sight of the two crestfallen little girls and their nice but clueless father.

“Hey, don’t cry” she touched Lena’s head and tousled her long, brown hair. “I’ll make sure you have some when you get there, ok? Who’s your favorite player Anna?”
The girls looked at her with complete adoration.

“Really?” Anna asked and then continued after the keeper nodded her head. “Umm, Rose Lavelle.”

“I promise” Ashlyn smiled as reassuringly as possible. “I can’t have my biggest fan not at the biggest game of the year now can I? I’ll get you a couple of jerseys too.”

After some sweet hugs and a nice, firm handshake for the dad, Ashlyn watched them walk off towards the museum.

“Say hi to the T-Rex for us!” she called after them with a wave.

“We will!” the little girls’ voices rang out in reply.

“T-wex” Drew said sleepily from his mama’s back.

“Ok buddy, let’s get going.” She squeezed his little legs. “Thanks for being such a good boy while we helped those nice people.”

The drizzle had let up and the sun was starting to come out as they continued their walk towards the K-H office building. Ashlyn picked up the pace because they were late now and Ali would be worried. She reached for her phone and hit the voice command and dictated a text to her wife.

Ashlyn: On our way to the car. Sorry we’re late. Be home soon. Xx Love you.

Aliebe: Ok. See you soon. Love you too. Xx

As the keeper put her phone away again she heard the sound of tires squealing in the distance. She frowned and looked down the street. It had come from the direction they were headed. There was a small curve to the left in the street and she couldn’t see around it but none of the pedestrians up ahead seemed concerned about anything so she didn’t give it another thought. They walked a few more steps and there were more tire squeals, louder this time. She stopped in her tracks when she saw a bright yellow car come tearing around the curve in the street, much too fast. The tires squealed as the car drifted towards the concrete median in the middle of the street. The driver overcorrected and pulled the car hard, back towards Ashlyn’s side of the street. The pedestrians ahead of her scattered as best they could as the car sped towards them. ‘Why isn’t he slowing down?’ Ashlyn thought as panic began to flood her system. He was swerving now, trying to avoid the people on the sidewalk as the car jumped the curb. His path was unpredictable and the keeper’s mind couldn’t calculate where the safest place might be. The different possibilities flashed through her brain. Should she just stand still and wait until he was closer to make a decision about which way to jump? Should she just start sprinting back towards the closest condominium building for protection and hope she got there before he plowed her down from behind? No, not that. Drew was on her back. She had to keep the car in front of her. Ashlyn stood there and got as ready as she could. She spread her legs a little bit and bent her knees, keeping her weight forward over the balls of her feet so she could jump when it was time.

The keeper watched in horror as the car ran over three people as it veered onto the sidewalk, still heading right towards her. It looked like the driver was unconscious. The whole thing only took about a minute but it felt like hours. Ashlyn grabbed her son’s legs tightly and tried to block out the screams from the people around her. She heard a siren and thought she saw flashing blue lights out of the corner of her right eye, but she wasn’t taking her eyes off of the yellow car for a second. Another pedestrian went down in front of her and then it was Ashlyn’s turn. She waited as long as she could, praying the car would swerve away from her. When it was obvious that wasn’t going to happen, the keeper bounced on her toes a few times and then launched herself as hard as she could to
her left. She summoned all of the power in her legs, fueled by fear and adrenaline, and stretched her body out as she tried to jump out of the way. For a brief, fleeting second she felt euphoric. The car didn’t hit her! She had done it! She had jumped far enough or he had swerved at the last second and she had guessed correctly. She started to concentrate on landing on her stomach so she didn’t land on top of her son who had grabbed onto her neck with a death grip as they flew through the air. Ashlyn figured she had another second before they landed and she let go of Drew with one hand and stuck it out in front of her to help break their fall.

That’s when she felt it. The car slammed into her right leg, down by her calf and shin, and she felt a searing pain shoot up her leg. The force of the impact swung her body around in the air and their landing spot disappeared. She tried to focus her eyes as she reached out blindly with her hand, grasping for something to hold onto to stop the momentum and keep her body from spinning back into the car. She held Drew’s leg tightly with her other hand and was relieved to feel him still holding onto her neck. Then she felt her head hit something hard and everything went black.

Back at the big old house Ali had just put Josie down for one of her afternoon naps and was about to text her wife again. She was borderline aggravated that Ashlyn and Drew weren’t home yet. It was almost 3pm and the keeper had texted at 1:20pm and then not responded to any texts since then. The brunette thought maybe her wife might have decided to take Drew to Whitney’s house for his nap and to hang out for the afternoon but the law student was at the library and hadn’t heard from her. Ali had checked with her twice. She checked with Dani, the head trainer, at the stadium but they hadn’t seen the keeper at all that day. Even Marcy didn’t have an answer for her.

“No she hasn’t come back yet” the executive assistant explained to her boss over the phone.

“What do you mean?” Ali asked, surprised. “She was in the office today?”

“No, well she parked here and she and Drew said hi to everybody before they walked to the museum. But her car’s still in the parking lot so she hasn’t come back yet.”

Ali’s mind was moving fast and trying to put the pieces together.

“Are you sure her car’s still there?”

“I’m looking at it right now from the window by my desk” Marcy replied.

“It’s been almost two hours since she texted me she was heading home” Ali repeated absent-mindedly. “What the hell?”

“The street’s all closed down because of the car accident earlier” Marcy offered helpfully. “They might have been re-routed and it’s just taken them a long time to get back here?” she said as more of a question. “It was a real mess down there for a while. They’re going to try and re-open the East bound lanes of traffic by 4:00pm. That’s what the news report said.”

As Ali’s brain tried to process the new information and the fear all at once, she felt like she was going to throw up. Her phone started beeping at her, telling her she had another incoming call.

“Marcy, I’ll call you back” she ended that call and then took the worst phone call of her life. “Hello?”

By the time the brunette made it to Massachusetts General Hospital it was just after 5:00pm and she was practically jumping out of her skin. It had taken forever to get there through 5pm rush hour traffic in Boston. Ali had been on the phone, it felt like, every minute since she had been contacted by the ER nurse at 3pm. Her first phone call had been to Vicki. Her stepmother was on her way to
the big old house to watch Josie. Ali was reminded, again, of how lucky they had gotten in the neighbor lottery when Julie Donaldson answered the knock on her back door and listened to a frantic Ali Krieger explain that Ashlyn and Drew had been in an accident in Cambridge and that she had to go to the hospital. Julie took her youngest with her and stayed at the big old house until Vicki arrived. The brunette’s next phone call, which she made as she started the long drive to the hospital, was to Marcy to give her the update. The call after that was to Dani, the Breakers trainer, at the stadium.

“Jesus Christ Ali!”

“I know, I know” the brunette choked out. “I’m on my way there now...”

“So am I” Dani cut her off. “Is she still in the ER? Where’s Drew?”

“Ash’s in the ER but she...she has a head wound and I gave them permission to...to operate if the swelling gets worse...” she couldn’t get any other words to come out for a minute.

“Ok, that’s good though Al” Dani tried to calm her down. “It’s not bad enough to need surgery right now. That’s good. Who’s with you right now?”

“No-one, I’m driving in. Drew is in the ER too. They think he has a broken arm” she couldn’t hold it in anymore, she gasped and cried out a huge sob.

“It’s going to be ok Ali. I’m on my way and I’ll definitely get there before you so just try and relax and drive safely for God’s sake. Do you hear me?”

“Yes. I will.” Ali took a couple of deep breaths that Dani could easily hear over the hands-free call. “Just, take care of them until I get there, please Dani.”

The desperation in her voice was something the head trainer would not soon forget. She took her own steadying breath before speaking again.

“Dom’s in-house today. I’m bringing him with me so Drew can see a friendly face.”

“Oh my God, thank you. Thank you...”

She made calls to Sydney, Whitney, her mom and then she had to call all of Ashlyn’s family. Ali wanted to wait until she had more concrete information before she called the Harrises but she couldn’t wait. She wouldn’t have wanted to wait if she were in their positions. The brunette got so frustrated waiting in the traffic that she seriously considered just leaving her truck and walking to the hospital, twice. She pulled up to Mass General and waited impatiently for the valet to give her the parking ticket before running through the doors and to the ER.

“Krieger” she announced loudly. “My wife and son were brought in earlier. They were in that car accident on Memorial Drive.”

“Patient’s names?”

“Ashlyn Krieger and Drew Krieger” she answered breathlessly.

Dani came up and gave Ali a hug.

“Dom’s with Drew and Ashlyn’s getting a head CT” she answered without being asked. “Everything’s ok.”
The ER intake nurse invited Ali to join her to complete all of the insurance documents and paperwork. The brunette’s shoulders slumped as she sat down at the little desk there to go through everything with the nurse.

“Let’s get this paperwork done so we can get you to your family as soon as possible” the nurse said with a kind smile.

Mass General was one of the busiest ERs in Boston and that evening was no exception. Any ER nurse would tell you they try to help the parents get to their young children as quickly as possible. Nine times out of ten the unattended child was much more cooperative once their parent was with them and everybody benefitted. And Drew was a perfect example. He had calmed down once Dom had arrived, clutching at the man he knew and loved in the strange and frightening place. The toddler wouldn’t sit still for the x-ray though and they needed to get a look at his broken left forearm so they could determine how best to treat it. If he didn’t settle down soon they would have to put him in a papoose and strap him down to keep him still. If that didn’t work they would need to sedate him.

The nurse updated Ali as they worked on completing the paperwork which was all computerized, as was everything in the hospital these days.

“Your wife came in with a broken leg, and a head injury. She was unconscious when she arrived but has since regained consciousness and is currently getting some tests done to determine the extent of her head injury. Your son seems to be fine except for his broken arm. He’s understandably upset and hasn’t let us get an x-ray yet.”

“He...he missed his nap” Ali explained needlessly.

“And I’m sure his arm hurts and he’s missing his mom too” the nurse smiled sympathetically. “Just another minute and you can go see him.”

Dani led the brunette to the ER room where Dom was sitting with a tearful, exhausted Drew lying on his chest. When Ali saw her son she sucked in a breath and tried to swallow the sob that threatened to break her down completely.

“Here’s mummy” Dom said softly into the top of Drew’s head and then gave it a kiss.

“Hi sweet boy” Ali cooed as she squatted down between Dom’s legs and rubbed her son’s back, wincing at the temporary splint on his left forearm.

“Mommy” he croaked out and reached for her.

Ali picked him up and held him tightly as she kissed his forehead and tried to remember not to squeeze him so hard that he couldn’t breathe. She gave Dom a grateful smile, closed her eyes and took another breath.

“Everything’s ok baby boy. Mommy’s here.”
Chapter Notes

This is one of those times when I post more than one chapter. Yah welcome.

Ashlyn’s hospital room was quiet, except for the beeping of the monitor, as she struggled to open her eyes. It was just after 7pm and Ali sat on the edge of her wife’s hospital bed by her hip, studying her face. It was pale and restless, her closed eyelids flicked back and forth and her mouth twitched. Her long blonde hair was a mess. It had been in a ponytail before the accident and now it was in three separate clumps. Each clump had some blood and dirt in it and the one on the left side of her head even had some grass mixed in. The right side of her head was swollen and covered in bandages and her hair had been shaved off there so the doctor could assess and treat the deep laceration she had suffered. As her body had spun around after being hit by the car, her head had struck a roadside signpost. It was hard to tell whether the ‘No U-turn’ sign had been good or bad for the keeper. The bad was that it had cut open her head and given her a mild concussion along with that deep laceration. The good was that it had stopped her from potentially spinning around even further and possibly under the back tires of the car. Ali shuddered when she thought about what could have happened to her wife and son if not for the sign.

There were several different videos of the accident, some from bystanders’ smartphones and others from the traffic cams in the area. They were all circulating on social media and the local news stations had shown a lot of it as well. Nobody had identified any of the victims yet but Ali knew it was just a matter of time. Two of the pedestrians that had been struck when the car first jumped the curb had been killed. One was an elderly man and the other was a young woman out for a jog during her lunch hour. Twelve other people had been injured, several quite seriously. Ashlyn and Drew had been some of the luckiest victims, coming away with only broken bones and no internal injuries. It made the brunette sick to her stomach to watch, but she couldn’t take her eyes off of the video taken from several yards behind her wife. Ali couldn’t believe the courage and strength her keeper had shown as she did everything in her power to protect herself and her son. And she had almost made it! She was so frustratingly close to succeeding that it just wasn’t fair.

The brunette looked over at Sydney and Whitney who were sitting in the two visitor chairs and at Dom who was sitting on a blanket on top of the air conditioning vent on the window sill. They were all still waiting for Ashlyn to wake up. She had been given some good drugs for the pain as they worked on her head wound and they had knocked her out for a little while. She was in a hospital gown with the blankets covering her up to her ribs. Except for her right leg which was up in a sling and immobilized. She would be having surgery in the morning to make sure the breaks were lined up correctly, she had completely broken both the tibia and the fibula. Drew, with his hard, blue fiberglass cast on his left forearm, slept on the bed next to Ashlyn’s healthy left leg. Visiting hours were ending at 8pm and Ali had been trying to figure out what to do for the past hour. Once Drew had fallen asleep in her arms it had been easier to think but she still didn’t know how she could leave either one of them that night. For the first time since she had found out about Ashlyn having to decide whether to save her wife or her daughter that terrifying June morning, Ali had an idea of just how horrible that had been for her sensitive keeper. Tonight was the worst situation the brunette could imagine and she was able to sit here with the two people she loved while she tried to make a similar but much less drastic decision. Ashlyn hadn’t had that luxury. Ali couldn’t imagine arriving at the ER and having to wait hours for news about her wife and son. She would have lost her damned
mind. She tried to steady herself as a wave of regret crashed against her for the millionth time in the past two hours. Even after she had heard what Ashlyn had gone through that morning and she had made peace with the events and apologized to the blonde for being such a judgmental bitch about telling her she had made the ‘wrong’ decision, she thought she had understood what her wife had gone through. She really felt like she had gotten a glimpse of it when they were at Mattie’s office and it had broken her heart in a way she didn’t think was possible. Even after all of the healing they had done together and separately that summer, Ali thought she understood. She knew now, in that moment sitting on Ashlyn’s hospital bed with their beautiful son, that she had no fucking clue what the keeper had gone through the morning Josie was born. The brunette would have to spend the next several years trying to make it up to her wife, but she knew that would never be enough. She would always regret the way she treated Ashlyn during that fight. It was easily one of the things she was most ashamed of in her whole life. Mostly what she wanted more than anything was for her keeper to wake up so she could tell her how much she loved her.

Whitney had offered to take Drew back to the big old house and sleep there with Vicki so she could help with both kids. She had class in the morning so she wouldn’t be able to linger but she would at least be there in case Drew woke up in the night while Vicki was busy with Josie, or vice versa. Sydney had made the same offer, as had Dom. Sandi was at their house with Cash and the dog so they could do whatever Ali needed them to do. The brunette knew she wasn’t going to ask the Dwyers for more help that night. Sydney was seven months pregnant and Ali didn’t want her stressing over anything other than her own baby. They hadn’t talked about it in a while, but both best friends harbored secret fears about the baby, especially after Josie’s harrowing arrival. Ken Krieger was out of town and Vicki had made Koty come home from Tufts to take care of Bandit for the night or, at the very least, drive him to Gloucester so she could manage it. She had been in such a rush to get to Gloucester when Ali called that she hadn’t even thought about arrangements for the dog that night.

Ashlyn groaned quietly and finally managed to get her eyes to stay open. She squinted and winced and tried to swallow. Ali held her breath and placed her warm hand on her keeper’s shoulder reassuringly.

“Hi babe” she managed to squeak out as her emotions threatened to steal all of her words.

“Al?”

“I’m right here honey, we all are” she nodded over her shoulder towards the visitors who were getting up to surround the patient. “And Drew’s just fine.” Ali knew that would be her first question if she were in Ashlyn’s place. “He’s asleep right here next to your leg” she rotated her torso, ignoring her own stab of pain, and patted her wife’s left thigh. “Can you feel him? Your own little furnace” she smiled at her wife as the blonde kept blinking her eyes and trying to see her son.

“Yeah” she said hoarsely. “I feel him” she worked her face into a half smile and winced again. “I’m so thirsty...”

Sydney, standing next to Ali, poured some water into the plastic cup, stuck a straw in it and handed it to her best friend.

“Here you go. Just use the straw” Ali encouraged when Ashlyn tried to reach for the cup. “I’ve got it.”

The blonde took a long sip and swallowed and then another. She moved her left hand over and put it on Ali’s thigh and the brunette thought she was going to cry again.

“Jesus Christ Ash” Whitney said, her own voice ragged with emotion from her place near Ashlyn’s
head on the other side of the bed. “You gave me a goddamned heart attack.” She grinned as a couple of tears escaped down her cheeks. “I’m so glad to see you.” She reached over the bed rail and squeezed the keeper’s hand, carefully avoiding the IV tubes and monitor wires over there on that side. “Fuck” the law student whispered emotionally.

“Language... Whit” Ashlyn chastised quietly and squeezed her hand back. “Language.”

They all laughed and almost woke the sleeping boy up before Ali shushed everybody, including herself.

“So Drew’s ok? Really? What time is it?” the keeper asked as she woke up more and adjusted to her situation.

“He has a broken arm...”

“How bad, which arm?”

“His left arm” Ali replied calmly, putting the plastic cup back on the table and caressing her wife’s left arm and hand still on her thigh. “It looks like he tried to break his fall with it. It was a clean break and he has a nice, blue cast on it” she grinned at her wife.

“What do you mean it looks like?” Ashlyn tried to shake her head but it hurt too much and she just closed her eyes and let it rest against the pillow again.

“Just lie still babe” the brunette said seriously. “You hit your head pretty bad so don’t try to do that again. Just be still and let it rest, ok?”

“There’s video of the accident” Whitney said slowly, glancing at Ali as Ashlyn still had her eyes closed. Ali shrugged her shoulders and the law student continued. “So we can see what happened” she paused. “And you’re a fucking beast is all I can say Ash. You made the save of your life today girl.”

“Language” Ashlyn said again with her eyes still closed. “I want to see it.”

“You have a mild concussion” Dom spoke now, using his most authoritative trainer’s voice. “You shouldn’t be looking at screens or anything until your head feels better.”

The nurse came in and checked her vitals, quietly, because she knew Drew was asleep. When she was finished she answered some of Ashlyn’s questions and then told everybody that it was almost time to leave before exiting the room again.

“Are you sure you don’t mind taking him home?” Ali asked Whitney, feeling guilty and conflicted and unsure.

“What?” Ashlyn spoke up. “Why aren’t you taking him home?”

“I’m staying here with you tonight Ashlyn. I need to make sure you’re alright...”

“Al, you just heard the nurse. I’m going to be asleep because of the pain medicine, I won’t even know you’re here” she reasoned with her wife. “Then they’re knocking me out bright and early for surgery. Please take Drew home and make sure he’s ok tonight. He might wake up scared or something and he’ll want his mommy, no offense Whit.”

“None taken” Whitney chuckled.
Ali chewed her bottom lip for a long minute and felt Sydney’s hand on her back, rubbing soothing circles there, understanding how hard the decision was for her best friend.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to stay with you?”

“Of course I want you to stay with me. And I want Drew to stay right where he is too but that’s not going to work baby” Ashlyn squeezed her wife’s hand and looked into her sad chocolate eyes. “Please take him home. I’ll still be here tomorrow” she tried to joke but she just didn’t have it in her. Her head was killing her and she really did just want to go back to sleep. “How about if I promise not to flirt with any cute doctors or nurses?” she managed, weakly.

“Well now you have a deal” Ali giggled. She chose not to point out that her half-shaved head was not going to win any beauty contests at the moment, no matter how tempting it was to tease her cocky wife. She carefully leaned forward and kissed her lips. “I love you so much Ashlyn” she whispered, only an inch from her face. “Don’t you ever forget that.”

“I love you too.”

//

“There” Kyle smiled broadly at his sister-in-law as he turned off the hair trimmer and brushed off the back of her neck Saturday morning. “What do you think?”

He held up the mirror to the back of her head as Whitney held up the big floor length mirror in front of her. They were in the kitchen of the big old house four days after the accident and Kyle had just given Ashlyn the best ‘Ruby Rose’ short fade haircut he could without disturbing her head wound. It was a complete change of look but something the keeper had been considering for a very long time. She was surprised at how big her face looked without all of her hair around it anymore.

“Once your head heals some more we can clean this up and make it even tighter along the sides and whatever else you think you might want” Kyle said nervously, afraid the blonde hated it. “But, for now, you’re at least presentable so you can show your face at the game next weekend.”

Kyle’s playful tease made both Ashlyn and Whitney chuckle, finally. Whitney had been holding her breath, afraid her bestie was unhappy or self-conscious about her new, shorter than short hairdo. Ashlyn had just come home from the hospital yesterday after having surgery on her leg Wednesday morning. She was supposed to come home Thursday but they wanted to keep her one extra day just to be sure the deep cut on the right side of her head was healing well enough and the symptoms of her mild concussion were getting better. The keeper had been horrified when she saw what the right side of her head looked like the day after the accident. The cut and all of the stitches holding her scalp together about an inch above her ear were scary and ugly to look at. Her scar was about six inches long and it ran horizontally from above her temple towards the back of her head. The doctors were surprised that she hadn’t fractured her skull but the blonde had just joked that she had a very hard head and told them to check with her wife if they doubted her.

“I love it” Ashlyn finally announced definitively, any doubt not evident in her voice. “Thank you Kyle. I owe you big time for this” she spoke as she turned her head from side to side, admiring the work he had done.

“Are you kidding me?” he laughed. “I’ve been waiting to do this for four years!”

“Wow” Ali breathed out from the foot of the backstairs as she entered the kitchen and saw the back of her wife’s head.
Ashlyn caught her wife’s eye in the mirror Whitney held in front of her and held her breath. The keeper loved her new short hair and didn’t give a rat’s ass what anybody else thought about it. Except for one person. The only opinion that mattered was her beautiful brunette’s and Ashlyn couldn’t read the look on her face yet.

“You look so good” Ali walked towards her keeper and ran her fingers through the short hair at the back of her neck with a smile.

“Yeah?” Ashlyn asked, still not sure if she believed her or not.

“Yeah babe” Ali moved to the front of her wife and kissed her lips, her hand still scratching at the back of her neck. “I love it.”

“We can fix it up after I heal some more...tell her Kyle.” Ashlyn looked to her side where Kyle and Whitney both stood grinning. “Tell her.”

“This is really mean you know you guys” Ali kissed her again, humming into it and grabbing tightly to the back of her neck. She stood up while Ashlyn held her hand. “Drop this hot new look on me right as I’m walking out the door. Not very nice at all.” She wagged her finger at her brother. “I’ll remember this.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?” Ashlyn offered.

“Honey, you should have your leg up right now” the brunette gave Whitney a stern look and then brought her attention back to her wife. “If you don’t do everything right this week then you won’t be able to go to the game next Saturday. You heard the doctor.” She gave the blonde another sweet kiss. “I’ll be back with your mom in a couple of hours.”

Ashlyn was going to be in a cast for three months, at least. If she healed well and behaved herself, she could get a walking cast in about six weeks or so and give up the crutches. She had to go back in two weeks to have the stitches removed from her head wound. In the meantime she had to try and keep the cut clean while it healed. Bandages hadn’t worked very well so they had given Ashlyn a kranio cap to wear over the top of her head. It had an elastic edge that you could loosen or tighten as necessary and it was the only thing that worked for the keeper. It was sort of like a shower cap only not plastic and not that big. It rested across the top part of her ear and the only trouble she had was keeping Drew from taking it off of her. But she still had headaches and pain near the cut and she was still not allowed to look at any screens yet. They were being a little over cautious but her doctors were not willing to take any risks with her previous concussion history. This had been a mild one but it was still a concussion.

Drew was doing ok with his little cast that covered his entire forearm and half of his left hand. He had been in pain for the first two days and Ali had given him children’s Tylenol to help ease it. By Friday when Ashlyn came home he was almost back to his normal, rambunctious self. He got a little crankier when he did too much and his arm started to ache. Both of his moms tried to explain to him that he needed to take it easy with his arm but the little boy didn’t understand. He felt indestructible with his cast and he was going to be wearing it for about ten weeks. Ali had called Mattie the day after the accident to ask her if they needed to bring Drew to talk to somebody about what he had gone through on Tuesday. The therapist explained that kids were usually very resilient and as long as he hadn’t seen too many things he should be ok. She advised the brunette to watch for any unusual behavior or reaction to things in his daily life. She also encouraged her to bring up the accident and get him talking about it without waiting for him to bring it up. Even if he didn’t join the conversation it was important for him to understand that it was ok to talk about it. Hearing his moms talk about it was the best way to get that message across.
“What about Ashlyn?” Ali asked towards the end of the phone call. “It’s so soon after what happened in June...”

“I know you’re worried about her Ali and that’s understandable” Mattie answered softly. “She’s been doing really good work and I’d like to think she won’t throw all of that away because of this trauma. But of course I’m concerned too.”

“So what do we do?”

“We wait for her to let us know what she needs. I’ll give you the same advice for Ashlyn that I gave you for Drew. Talk about it with her. Show her the video as soon as she’s ready. Ask her how she’s feeling about it.”

“Show her the videos? Are you sure?”

“I am.” The therapist paused for a few seconds. “I don’t want her to imagine something more or something worse than what actually happened.”

“She said her imagination is part of what made her nightmares such a problem for her” Ali responded, feeling a little guilty talking about her wife behind her back.

“I’m glad she told you that” Mattie reassured the brunette. “And it’s a possibility that she may start having nightmares again because of this and they might be different ones altogether or they may just trigger the old river of blood nightmares again. We’ll just have to wait and see. But the important thing to remember is that Ashlyn has the tools now to fight them. We have an appointment next week. Do you think she’ll be able to make it?”

“I’ll make sure she does.”

When Tammye had gotten the call from Ali she immediately made plans to go back up to Gloucester. The only real benefit of being a temporary employee and working for a temp agency was that she could take time off if she really needed to. It was unpaid, of course, so she tried not to take any more time than her two weeks paid vacation every year. But she took the rest of September off so she could go help her daughter as she recovered. Carol couldn’t make the trip. She had just taken the two weeks in August and they were also planning to go back to the big old house for Columbus Day weekend in October for Josie’s baptism. She would come up for a long weekend as soon as she could. That Saturday morning, four days after the accident, Ali was on her way to Boston to pick her mother-in-law up at the airport.

Kyle had taken the train up to Boston Friday afternoon so he could help his sister out that weekend. Whitney had cleared her schedule so she could do the same thing and was planning on sleeping at the big old house too. Vicki and Sydney had split duties during the week to be there for Ali so she could go in to the hospital to see her wife. Vicki moved into the guest room for three nights and Sydney came over each day after school and stayed until the kids were in bed. Ashlyn kept telling them that they were making a mountain out of a mole hill but it didn’t do any good. Ali didn’t even try to talk their friends and family out of helping any more. She was so happy that Ashlyn and Drew were ok that nothing else mattered that week. She let Vicki and Sydney run things for her for those three days and, as long as Drew and Josie were ok, didn’t care what happened to their routines or habits. The young Krieger family had been given another harsh dose of perspective and instead of going to a dark place like she had in June, Ali ran towards the light and embraced it, thankful for the help and the love all around her.

Sure enough, it had only taken until the day after the accident for people to figure out that Ashlyn Harris had been one of the pedestrians injured. Her Breakers teammates knew instantly that she was
the blonde in the ponytail who almost jumped clear of the car when they watched all of the videos all over social media. One of the local sports writers recognized her too and the Breakers, after checking with Ali as wife and agent, released a brief press release saying how relieved they were that both Ashlyn and her son were recovering well from the accident. It became kind of a scene after that as everybody tried to find out more information on her injuries and her availability for the rest of the season and the playoffs. Ashlyn and Ali had never been more grateful that the blonde had taken Ali’s name when they got married. Nobody was looking for Ashlyn Krieger’s medical records. The keeper released her own statement on all of her social media accounts Thursday morning.

‘Grateful to be alive! There are so many people to thank: doctors, nurses, first responders, the kind strangers who tried to comfort my son while I was unconscious. I’m deeply sorry for the three lives lost in the accident, including the driver, and I hope their families and friends can somehow find some peace. And, although I know it’s just a game and it pales in comparison, I’m sorry to all of my Boston Breakers teammates, coaches and fans for not being able to finish this season out. Thank you for your thoughts and prayers, they are very much appreciated.’

The Patriots season was underway and Bob Kraft, Jonathan Kraft, and Julian Edelman all paid her a visit Thursday after the rest of the team had gone and spent time with the other accident victims at the various hospitals where they were recovering and getting treatment. There were some cute pictures of the keeper and Julian that made the social media rounds. As they were getting ready to leave, the wide receiver got surprisingly emotional and wrapped his friend up in a big hug.

“I love you, you big idiot” he whispered from inside the hug. “But if you do something like this again I’m gonna kill you.”

Lifetime TV set up an interview with Ashlyn that they wanted to air during the pre-game show for their final Game of the Week broadcast in two weeks. The Breakers were hosting Kansas City and it figured to be a big game as Boston tried to claw its’ way into that fourth and final playoff spot. Ashlyn agreed to it only if Heather O’Reilly conducted it. She was feeling raw and exposed and she wanted to be around people and friends she trusted. She was in no way obligated to do the interview and she figured if the network had a problem with her request they could just interview somebody else. The keeper had a plan that had been percolating in her mind since she had started feeling better after all of her work with Mattie that summer.

“You want to do what?” Ali’s eyes went wide when Ashlyn explained her idea the first night she was home.

The keeper was in bed and Ali was just finishing propping her right leg up on three pillows for the night. The brunette walked around to her side of the bed and got in, sitting backwards so she could face her wife while they talked.

“I want to talk about my mental health struggles. I want everybody out there to know that it’s ok to struggle, as long as you don’t quit.” She paused for a minute and watched Ali chew her bottom lip. “They have to know it’s ok to talk about. And if somebody who has a platform like mine doesn’t start talking about it, then what’s the fucking point?”

“I’m scared Ash” Ali confessed quickly, her mind racing. “People are so horrible and I...I want to protect you from all the assholes out there.” She took another couple of breaths and held her wife’s hand. “And this feels like you’d be exposing yourself to a whole new level of scrutiny and bullshit and I don’t know if you can handle it.”

“Me?” Ashlyn asked softly. “Or you?”

Ali looked at her favorite hazel eyes and saw so much strength there that it almost took her breath.
“Both” she admitted and looked down, embarrassed that she couldn’t be stronger for her keeper.

“I really feel like I need to do this Al. I want to talk to Mattie and find out what the right things are to say about it so I don’t steer anybody wrong, but I really want to do this.”

“What about the kids?” Ali’s voice was low and afraid and she was ashamed at what she was thinking and saying. “What happens when they get older and the other kids start teasing them about their crazy mama?”

“See, that’s exactly why I have to do this.” Ashlyn leaned forward and lifted Ali’s chin until her eyes met her own. “No-one should ever feel like they can’t ask for help because they’re going to get teased about it. Hopefully, by the time some asshole teases Drew about me there will be enough kids like Drew who will stand up to that bully and tell him he’s wrong.”

“You really have thought a lot about this haven’t you?” the brunette asked with an impressed smile.

“I have” the keeper nodded and smiled back. “I think I can get Hilary and Julian to help me out too.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’ll both do a PSA about it with me, maybe even at the same time, like a squad goals sort of thing.”

“Well, probably not at the same time unless you’ve finally convinced Julian to sign with Nike” Ali chuckled. “But I get where you’re going with this.”

“It all starts with the interview and then we can grow it from there” the blonde pulled her wife closer to her and kissed her tenderly. “I know this fucks everything up for my agent...”

“Hey” Ali interrupted her quickly. “If your agent gives you any shit about this you just let me know and I’ll kick her uptight ass” she grinned.

“Seriously though baby, I don’t want to destroy everything you’ve worked so hard for all these years. So think about it and let me know, like, the limits or where the lines are that I can’t cross so I lose all my sponsors.”

“Ashlyn, I don’t know if it’s because of almost losing you or what, but I couldn’t care less about your sponsors” Ali replied earnestly. “Fuck ‘em. And, as long as I’m your agent, that’s going to be my response to any complaints we get about your new haircut or your new mission to help millions of people feel ok about themselves if they struggle with mental illness.”

“God I love you” Ashlyn hugged her wife tightly to her chest and kissed the top of her head.

“I love you too honey. You’ve only got this one life so make it count.”

“What’s that wild and crazy life quote you love so much again?” the keeper asked as they settled in to their sleeping positions and Ashlyn turned off her bedside lamp.

“Mary Oliver” Ali replied with a smile. “‘Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?’”

“Yes. I love that” the keeper beamed in the darkness as she held the love of her life in her arms. //
By the middle of the following week Ashlyn’s head started feeling much better. She only got a headache if she overdid it and read too much or looked at her laptop screen for too long. She had taken it easy and let her mother and her wife take care of her for four straight days, even missing Cash’s 4th birthday party on Sunday. Sydney threw the party at a big, indoor bounce house place and basically forbade the keeper from attending.

“I have a headache just thinking about it right now” Sydney explained with a laugh. “There’s no way your head is going anywhere near that party. I know you love my kid. That’s why he’s your Godson. We’re good.”

Ashlyn had convinced Ali to bring her to the stadium on Tuesday, after her one-week check-up, so she could show her teammates that she was ok. The Breakers had their second to last game of the season Wednesday night and they needed to beat North Carolina to keep their playoff hopes alive. The team was thrilled to see her and even the head coach got choked up as he announced the special visitor who was coming to talk to the team about perseverance and toughness as they got ready for the biggest game all year. When Ashlyn crutched her way into the room everybody got up and rushed to her with hugs and kisses and pats on the back. Somebody got her a chair and they all huddled around her, chatting animatedly and loudly. As Ali stood behind her in the doorway to the room, she had déjà vu to when the team had come to visit them in the hospital after Drew was born. She started to get choked up herself and was about to tell everyone to keep their voices down to protect the keeper’s still healing head.

“Ladies, keep it down, please” Dani warned everybody with a chuckle. “She’s got a head wound and you’re probably killing her right now. Inside voices, please.”

Ashlyn showed everybody the scar on the side of her head and her new hairdo, of course.

“It looks better when I style it right and don’t put a hat on it, I swear” she promised with a shy giggle.

“I think it’s fucking awesome” young, talented Duff offered, surprising the keeper with her support.

Ali left them alone and made some phone calls to the office to check in. She had started the wheels moving on Ashlyn’s latest mission and the response had been better than she had expected from both her sponsors and some of the other athletes Ali and her team had reached out to. Coach had given them an hour with their special guest and the brunette went back to find that the lighthearted gabfest had turned into a pretty intense strategy session. Someone had gotten the keeper some pillows and another chair and propped her leg up for her and they were all huddled up and talking about how best to beat North Carolina the next night. Ali held her breath when Angela Salem caught her eye and walked over to her.

“She wants to see some of the videos” the midfielder explained with a look of concern on her face.

“Yeah, ok” Ali swallowed. She couldn’t think of a better place for it to happen than here with her teammates. Her second family. “Use a laptop if you can and keep it as far away from her face as possible. That’s the best way and it usually doesn’t hurt her head for fifteen minutes or so.”

“Got it” Angela replied and texted into her phone before starting to walk back to the group.

“Ang?” Ali’s voice was quiet and her smile was small.

“Yeah Al?”

“Thank you.”

“You got it” Angela smiled broadly. “Anything for Keep.”
It only took five minutes and three different video clips for the blonde to get agitated. She kept telling Kristie to go back and rewind the video towards the very end of the third one they watched. Ali walked towards the group, concerned. She had given them some privacy and kept her distance but once her wife started to get upset she couldn’t keep her legs from moving towards the blonde. Ashlyn took her glasses off and rubbed her eyes before putting them back in place and watching the same section again. Ali felt her own heart rate increase when she saw what her keeper was looking at over and over again. It was after the car had come to a stop and it was the footage that had been taken from behind Ashlyn as she faced down the oncoming car. It was a security camera from the lobby of the nearby condominium building that the blonde had considered trying to run to before deciding to stand her ground. It was a good thing too because the car had ended up crashing right into the lobby and severely injuring the handful of people sheltering there. The driver was already dead before the car reached that lobby. He was a man in his early 50s who had suffered a heart attack and died while he was driving. There was no bad guy in this story. Just innocent victims. A lot of the news stations had aired this clip and focused on the foreground, where the car had come to rest. But in the background, thirty feet away where Ashlyn lay crookedly on her stomach because of the backpack there, unconscious and bleeding, you could see Drew. He was sitting up, facing the lobby, and balling uncontrollably about three feet past his mama. He held his injured left arm out awkwardly to his side and scooted towards Ashlyn’s lifeless body. There were dozens of pedestrians running around or walking around stunned or injured and a police car arrived just offscreen as the camera rolled.

“There!” Ashlyn yelled out excitedly. “Everybody watch these two...I can’t see very well and I want to be sure.”

“Ash, what are you talking about?” Ali asked carefully from behind the group.

“Just watch, please” Ashlyn answered without taking her eyes off of the laptop in Kristie’s lap.

“It’s two little girls” Julie King said, squinting at the screen.

“Yeah, one has long brown hair and a dark blue shirt” Tasha Dowie added.

“And the other one has lighter hair and...”

“A purple tank top, right?” Ashlyn asked and leaned forward as far as her hamstring would allow her to.

“Yeah” Kristie looked at the blonde. “Do you know those girls Ash?”

Ashlyn felt tears start falling down her face as she watched their nervous father run up behind them as they sat down next to Ashlyn and tried to comfort Drew. He knelt down and checked the boy’s head, running his hands all around it and then doing the same to his midsection. The younger girl, in the blue shirt, who Ashlyn knew was Lena, took Drew’s right hand and held it from her place beside him. Anna, the older sister in her purple tank top, patted him on his legs and spoke to him. There was no audio on the video but it was clear that they were trying to calm him down while their father checked for injuries. In the sweetest moment of the whole video, assuming for a second that you could get past the fact that there were two dead bodies another 50 feet behind the keeper’s unconscious body, Drew takes a big, shuddering breath and leans into Anna as he starts to go into shock.

“I do” Ashlyn gasped out through her tears as the video came to a sudden end. It was impossible to know if it had been cut off there or if the camera actually malfunctioned and there was no more footage. “I gave them directions to the museum a block earlier. I can’t believe they came back.”
Smut warning

It took Ashlyn a little while to compose herself and tell everybody the story of the two girls and their father. She and Ali had both heard several witnesses talk about ‘people’ trying to take care of a little boy whose mother had been hit by the car. Eventually they realized it was Ashlyn and Drew that they were describing. That’s why the keeper had thanked ‘the kind strangers who tried to comfort my son’ in her social media message two days after the accident.

“We have to find them Ali” Ashlyn looked pleadingly at her wife after sharing the story and wiping the tears off of her face.

“I just called Marcy and they haven’t called or left a message for you yet” the brunette replied sadly. “I’m not sure what else we can do except wait for them to reach out.”

“No way” Rose Lavelle spoke up. “I’ll post a request for Anna and her sister Lena to get in touch with us. I’ll tell them Ashlyn is trying to reach them.”

“You’re going to get a whole lot of the crazy fans responding to stuff like that though” Ali countered thoughtfully as her brain started to work on the problem.

“We’ll announce it on the public address system at tomorrow night’s game and we’ll make sure the commentators announce it a few times during the live stream too. Maybe they’ll see it or hear it and get in touch” the coach, who nobody even realized had come back into the room, offered matter-of-factly.

“Thanks coach” Ashlyn smiled at the gruff Brit. “I really appreciate that.”

“I just posted it” Rose added with a shrug of her shoulders. “I’ll let you know if I hear anything.”

“I retweeted it” Kristie announced and was followed by several other players.

Before long the entire team had subjected themselves to hundreds and, in Rose, Kristie, Megan Oyster and Abby Smith’s case probably thousands, of unwanted and annoying direct messages from crazy fans who would do anything for the chance to talk to Ashlyn Harris.

“Thank you all” the keeper’s voice cracked as she fought to keep her emotions in check. “I can’t tell you how much that means to me.”

“To us” Ali added with her own warm smile. “Thank you.”

The Breakers lost their Wednesday night game to the North Carolina Courage and everybody that watched it was outraged. It was another situation where the official inserted himself into the game and, instead of controlling the two teams as discreetly as possible as any good ref does, dictated the style and tempo of play himself by making questionable calls and bringing extra drama to a game that
already had enough to spare. It was late in the game and the score was tied 2-2. Julie King made one of the best slide tackles you could ever imagine and knocked the ball away from a streaking Lynn Williams just inside the 18. Abby Smith pumped both her fists in exultation as she watched Megan Oyster clear the ball back up the field to try and get a counter attack started. The joy lasted all of two seconds before they heard the fucking whistle for the millionth time that night. Everybody groaned, and Julie King was apoplectic as she stormed towards the idiot official. She was the team captain so it was her job to argue the call, especially such an important call, and especially such a terrible call to boot. But somebody should have stopped her because, in addition to the ridiculous penalty kick that was awarded to and successfully converted by the Courage, she got her second yellow card of the game and was sent off. And that meant she would miss the next game too as a result of the discipline. It was a mess. The coach almost got thrown out of the game right after his captain and he let the league and the world know just how terrible the official, and that particular call, had been all night long in his press conference after the match.

“These ladies work too damned hard to have a game hijacked by some megalomaniacal official” the coach used finger quotes for the word ‘official’. “Even though they got the victory tonight, if you ask the Courage players about it they’ll tell you the very same thing. It’s a disgrace the way this game was conducted tonight and I’ll be making a formal complaint to the league. Again.”

His final point wasn’t lost on many. It had only been two years since the Portland Thorns stole the Championship game from them because of horrendous officiating. That had been what had started the overhaul of the entire officiating division of the NWSL back at the end of the 2019 season. And, in everybody’s defense, the officiating had gotten much better over the past two years. Which was what made this outlier so hard to swallow.

The Breakers’ chances for making the playoffs weren’t completely dead yet, but now they were in an even tougher spot. They had to win their last game and both Orlando and North Carolina had to lose for Boston to claim the final playoff spot. North Carolina and Orlando were tied for fourth place in the league after the games Wednesday night. Orlando had them beat by goal differential and would go to the playoffs if everything stayed the same. Boston was one point behind them and praying for a miracle.

On Thursday morning Ali sat in Mattie’s outer office playing the Memory card game with Drew. They only used eight cards and Ali had carefully picked out the pairs with her son’s favorite pictures on them. The big red ball, the friendly dog, the surfboard, and the blue truck. She spread them out face down on the coffee table and watched her boy try to find two cards that matched each other, while they waited for Ashlyn to finish her session. They weren’t trying to get Drew to go to therapy. He had seemed fine since the accident, talking about it when one of them brought it up and calling it ‘the cwash’. He still couldn’t say his Rs. But Ali didn’t want to leave poor Tammye home alone with both kids unless it was absolutely necessary. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust her mother-in-law, it was just that Tammye was, physically, the weakest of the grandmas. The arthritis in her hands and wrists often gave her trouble and made it harder for her to wrangle Drew if he was acting up. She wasn’t an invalid or anything but both Ashlyn and Ali were careful not to ask too much from her if they could help it.

“Ali, can you and Drew come in please” Mattie asked as she stood in the open doorway to the inner office.

Once they were seated, Drew snuggled into Ashlyn’s arms and gave her a big, sloppy kiss. Ali grinned at the interaction and tried to assess how her wife was doing at the same time. She looked tired and her eyes were red but the smile on her face was wide and sincere.
“Ashlyn thought, since he was here, it might be a good time just to show Drew what happens in here. Just in case he ever does need to come and talk about anything” Mattie explained as she smiled at the boy and his mama snuggling on the couch.

“I never thought about that” Ali raised her eyebrows and looked at the therapist. “Might as well, since we’re here.”

“Ashlyn says she hasn’t noticed any behavioral changes in him since the accident. Would you agree with that?”

“Yes. I would. We’ve talked with him about it several times both directly and indirectly. Ashlyn has talked about some of her experiences while he was in the room and part of the discussion and he seems to be handling it well.” She smiled at her brave young son. “He calls it ‘the crash’” she explained.

“Did he come up with that on his own?”

“Yeah” the keeper replied as Drew shifted positions and sat on her lap with his back to her front. “Ali asked him what it had sounded like and he said ‘a big crash’.”

“Cwash” Drew said, right on cue. He held up his casted left arm for the therapist to see and he reached up behind him and patted Ashlyn’s cheek and then pointed at her leg that was stretched out on the coffee table in front of them. “Ouchies from the cwash.”

Ali felt her chest tighten as her son told his brief story to Mattie. Just ouchies. But then she felt her heart swell with pride at how well he seemed to be handling the traumatic event. Mattie asked Drew a couple of questions about that day, the museum and the dinosaurs and the crash and the hospital. Drew answered them all with the same demeanor and disposition and Mattie smiled at him as he spoke.

“T-wex!” he exclaimed and then made the best roaring sound a toddler can make without being able to pronounce any Rs yet.

“It certainly looks like he’s processing everything well and in the proper perspective for a 2-1/2 year old” the therapist grinned again.


“He talked to us about the dinosaurs and the lunch he had at the museum the same way he talked about the crash and the hospital” Mattie answered. “That’s how it should be for someone his age.”

She left her eyebrows up when she was finished speaking to let the grown-ups know there was more to say but she didn’t want to say it with him right there.

“As opposed to us who see one of those things as significantly different than the others” Ali questioned back vaguely.

“Exactly” Mattie nodded and smiled.

“Can I say something?” the brunette asked after a quick glance at the clock. “Since we’re here. It’ll only take a minute but I haven’t been able to find a good time or way to say it...”

“Go ahead Ali” the therapist interrupted her with a kind nod.

Ali took a deep breath and tried to organize her thoughts for a minute. She thought about this every
day but not in a cogent way that she could explain to somebody else, and she hadn’t planned on saying it right now either.

“I just...I want you to know Ashlyn, that I thought I understood before. I thought I had an idea about what kind of awful circumstance you were in the night Josie was born.” She swallowed hard as she shifted her body to the side and looked at her wife. “I know now that I understood enough to make peace with it and to realize that there was no good answer and there never could be.” She saw Ashlyn’s jaw flex and quickly reassured her. “No, it’s nothing bad babe, I promise. I just want you to know that I understand it so much better now” she shook her head and dropped her eyes for a second as she tried not to cry. She didn’t want to scare Drew. “When I got that phone call from the Emergency room last week” she stopped and cleared her throat then smiled at her son who was watching her carefully. “Let’s just say that I have a whole new level of respect for what you went through in the dark hours that morning. And I just wanted you to know that.”

Ashlyn reached out and held her wife’s hand, surprised to find it trembling slightly. She cocked her head and smiled softly at the brunette, understanding exactly what she was trying to say.

“I love you too sweetheart.”

It wasn’t until later that night that they were able to talk about it again. Ali had just put Josie down after Ashlyn had given her the 10pm bottle. Drew had been asleep since 8pm and Tammye had retired for the night to the front bedroom. The brunette walked into their bedroom, closing and locking the door to the hall behind her. She went to the door to the backstairs and locked it too, then took two steps and climbed on top of Ashlyn’s lap on the bed. Ali straddled her keeper’s hips, careful not to put any weight on her upper leg.

“Hi sugarplum” the blonde opened her eyes wide with surprise and then smiled broadly as she took in the beautiful sight on her lap.

Ali’s face looked tired and her hair was up in a messy bun that was leaning more to one side than the other. She wore thin, blue cotton pajama pants, images of different ingredients for an ice cream sundae scattered all across them, and an old, grey Penn State t-shirt. Her pregnancy pouch hadn’t gone down all the way yet and her usual sleep tanks were a little tight still. She was finding it more difficult to tighten up her stomach skin after this pregnancy but was trying hard not to get too frustrated about it. She knew her body would never look the same after two babies. She would get it looking good again but she would always have the stretch marks near both her hips from carrying Drew and now, the c-section scar from Josie’s delivery. She didn’t love either, if she was being brutally honest. But they were part of her body now and she was just going to have to learn to love them over time. Luckily for her, she had an amazing wife who made her feel beautiful every day, even if the brunette hadn’t been feeling that way herself.

“Hi” she replied softly and blinked her eyes slowly. “I love you so much Ashlyn” she said in a voice full of emotion.

She kissed her keeper passionately, taking her time and using every part of her tongue and lips to try and tell her wife just how much she loved her. Ashlyn readily returned the kiss, moaning into the brunette’s mouth and letting her hands travel up and down the bare skin of her sides beneath the t-shirt. She was surprised when Ali pulled back from the kiss, eyes closed and chest heaving.

“What’s the matter?” the keeper studied her wife’s pink face and wasn’t sure if she was blushing from being turned on or from embarrassment. “Are you ok?”

“I’m good” Ali looked up bashfully at her gorgeous wife with her sexy new haircut. “I just...I want to make sure you understand what I was trying to say at Mattie’s office this morning.”
“You mean about you understanding what happened the night Josie was born better now because you were put in a similar position because of the accident?” the blonde tilted her head a little bit, trying to follow her wife’s line of thought.

“Yeah” Ali picked up one of Ashlyn’s hands and brought it to her lips so she could kiss it. “Two things actually. First is I want to make sure you really believe me when I say I get that there was no right or wrong answer. After I heard what you went through...there was no way I could ever think one answer was right and the other was wrong again. I need to know that you believe me.”

Ashlyn studied her face for a minute and was surprised by the worry she saw housed in it.

“I believe you Al. I believed you when you took those words back when we were in Mattie’s office with Whitney. I knew then that you wished you had never said it.”

“I wished I had never thought it” Ali added as she gave her keeper’s hand another soft kiss. “I still can’t believe that was what came out of my messed-up head back then” she shook her head sadly. “I’ll never be able to forgive myself for making you doubt yourself like that. I’m so sorry Ashlyn.”

“I know honey” the blonde moved her other hand up and cupped her wife’s sad face. “I know. It’s ok. I put that all away back during that session. I promise, it’s ok.”

“God I don’t deserve you sometimes, most of the time...”

“Hey, baby, where are we going with this because I’m not into you feeling bad about something that we’ve both been over for two full months now” Ashlyn frowned at her wife.

“No, I know” Ali spoke quickly. “Can I tell you a secret? That’s the second thing.”

“Of course. Anything sweetheart” Ashlyn focused on her wife’s nervous face and felt unease in her own stomach.

Ali took three deep breaths, all with her eyes closed, and then opened them when she was ready to talk again.

“When Kyle was here last month he was asking me about...everything. And I was trying to explain what I was still feeling about you and me and how fucked up things got in July.” She paused and took another deep breath. “I brought up the answer you gave Dr. Comello and he looked at me the same way you are right now – like I was an idiot who didn’t know when to let something just be.” She smiled shyly and leaned down to kiss the blonde’s lips. “It’s ok, I promise.”

“If you say so” Ashlyn quirked an eyebrow and tried to be patient.

“Ok. So part of the reason I couldn’t get your answer out of my head, I realized after some work with Mattie, was that I was afraid...”

“That you would have answered her differently” Ashlyn interrupted, getting antsy. “I know Al.”

“No, well, yes, but there’s more to it. Fuck! Why is this so hard to get out” she was frustrated and getting aggravated with herself.

“Relax baby” the keeper massaged her wife’s thighs and gave her a small, encouraging smile. “Just take your time.”

“I was afraid that because my answer, at the time anyway, would have been for Patty to save the baby, that it meant that I didn’t love you as much as you loved me. Otherwise I would have said to
save you” she spoke quickly, ignoring Ashlyn’s advice. She just fucking wanted to say it and get it out of her system once and for all. Especially now that she knew she was wrong about it. “But now I know that it wasn’t true. I mean, I knew it wasn’t true all along and Kyle told me I was making trouble where there wasn’t, again. But now, after last week, it’s like I have the proof my screwed-up mind needed.”

“You thought what?” Ashlyn scrunched her face up as she tried to figure out what Ali was talking about.

“I know, it’s dumb” Ali rolled her eyes at herself and sighed. “I know I do love you just as much as you love me. We’ve always been that way, it’s part of what is so wonderful about us” she said confidently. “But I got all in my head about why my answer to Patty was different than yours and that was all I could come up with at the time.”

“Why didn’t you say something Al? Maybe I could have helped you figure it out?” the keeper’s voice was full of concern. “You’ve kept this inside since July?”

“Well I told Kyle so it was only, like, a month. But it’s not that big a deal. I think part of me knew I was being...dramatic or silly. I was sure it would go away with time and it actually got easier to ignore. But that’s why I’m trying, and failing in so many ways, to tell you this now honey. I thought I was going to die last week when I got that phone call after the accident. I mean, it shook me to my core and I didn’t know which way was up. And when I got to the hospital and you were both in different places and I had to decide who to check on first. Ugh, it was like God or somebody was showing me just how awful it had been for you when Josie was born. It was like I was getting my comeuppance for being such a bitch to you about it.” Ali smiled nervously at her wife who was still rubbing her thighs and trying to follow along. “I’ve been thinking about it a lot, every night it’s the first thing that pops into my head when I try to go to sleep. And now I know, without any doubt from the peanut gallery in my own head, that I love you as much as you love me, maybe even more...who knows. And it feels awesome and I wanted to tell you.”

The brunette beamed at her wife and felt foolish and then embarrassed and regretful all in short order as she waited for Ashlyn to say something. The keeper was still processing everything Ali had said and trying to decide how she felt about it.

“Are you mad?” Ali asked after a few seconds and chewed on her bottom lip, unable to be patient.

“No, I’m not mad Al” Ashlyn chuckled softly. “I’m just trying to make sure I’ve got everything straight.”

“The Cliff Notes version is that I love you an insane amount and I keep loving you more and more all the time and I can’t believe how fucking lucky we are” the brunette smiled hopefully at her wife.

“That definitely seems simpler” the keeper laughed but then got serious again. “And I’m not supposed to worry about you thinking you didn’t love me as much as you love me, right?”

“Right” Ali answered seriously too. “God, is that what you got from that?” she looked horrified. “I’m telling you this because it made me happy and I thought it would make you happy too. Damn.”

“Al it’s ok” Ashlyn squeezed her thighs to get her attention and stop her head from spinning. “Tell me if I’ve got this part right and if I do, then I’m good and we’re all set. Ok?”

“Ok.”

“After you realized there was no right or wrong answer you were trying to pack that all away in your
mind and move on. But you kept thinking about why you might have answered Patty differently. The reason you came up with was that I loved you more than you loved me” she paused and looked questioningly at the brunette straddling her lap.

“Yeah, that sounds so fucked up” Ali shook her head. “But so far, so good.”

“As you’ve just so eloquently explained, you knew that couldn’t be right but you’ve been unable to get that idea all the way out of your head until the accident happened. The scary reality that you could have lost me made you realize just how much you loved me and drove that ridiculous idea out of your head once and for all.”

“Yes!”

“And that made you very happy and you wanted to share that with me.” Ashlyn quirked her eyebrow. “How’d I do?”

“So good honey” the brunette switched Ashlyn’s hands and brought the new one to her lips and kissed it. “I think, after hearing it like that, maybe I should have just kept my mouth shut.”

“No baby, I’m glad you told me. And now that I get it better, I’m happy you’re happy. Thank you for talking with me about it, even though it was hard.”

Ashlyn pulled her wife’s face down and gave her a slow, deep kiss. She tried to use her lips and tongue to allay all of her beautiful brunette’s fears and doubts about sharing her secret.

“It’s been a summer full of hard lessons to learn but we’re both right here, together, and that’s all that matters” the blonde said sincerely. “I almost lost you and Josie. You almost lost me and Drew. I think the universe is trying to tell us to be happy and love each other every minute of every day and stop worrying so much about...everything else.”

“Amen to that” Ali added with a quiver in her voice. “God I love you Ashlyn.”

They lost themselves in another passionate kiss that led to another and then another. They weren’t rushing. They took their time and enjoyed every second of each kiss as they made out that night. Before they knew it they were both hot and bothered and wanting more than just kisses. Ashlyn pulled her wife’s shirt up over her head and started to lick and suck on her perky breasts as Ali moaned in pleasure.

“Oh yeah, babe. Mmmmmmm” Ali hummed and started to grind against her keeper’s mound.

Ashlyn separated her lips from her favorite breasts in the whole world and pulled her own sleep shirt off, wincing when she carelessly tugged it too hard against her stitched up head.

“Oh shit” Ali stopped moving and came to a worried attention. “Your head.”

“You were there baby, you heard the doc clear me for normal activity. I’m good, I promise.”

“But you were just in pain...”

“I was dumb and pulled my shirt off the wrong way” she chuckled. “I was a little distracted” she wagged her eyebrows and smirked. “I promise my head’s ok and if it starts to hurt I swear I’ll tell you.”

“But what about your leg?”
“It’ll be fine. Just, maybe ride my left leg and not my right one. How about that?”

Ashlyn had her at ‘ride’ and she knew it. She watched the brunette’s eyes darken until they were practically black as Ali fought an internal battle between caring for her injured wife and fucking her brains out to help heal a different part of her. They had been having sex pretty regularly since their afternoon delight at the Beauport, making use of naptimes and Josie’s longer sleeping schedule at night. They were averaging about once a week or every ten days and they were both more than happy with that for the time being. It had been nine days since the accident and it had been almost a full week before that when they had last had sex. They were both ready to go that Thursday night at the end of September, sleep be damned.

“Get the harness and the pink dildo and put it on me” Ashlyn urged as she put her mouth back to work on one of Ali’s dark pink nipples.

The brunette leaned her head back, closed her eyes and moaned at the thought of riding her sexy keeper. She hadn’t used any of their toys since the baby but she knew the slender pink dildo would feel so good inside of her. Ali was lost in the feel of her wife’s lips on her breast and her hands all over her pajama-clad ass. Ashlyn had to give her butt a smack and pull her lips back with a pop to get her attention.

“Go on, please baby” she encouraged again and was pleased to see the brunette move off of her lap and over to the box in her closet by the head of the bed.

As Ali got the dildo and washed it quickly in the bathroom, the keeper carefully moved herself into the middle of the bed. She arranged the pillows and kept her right leg propped up, but not quite as high. She would be ok for an hour at the lower elevation. Ashlyn pushed her sleep shorts down and struggled to get them off of her cast so she left them there. She just freed her left leg and let the shorts stay around her right knee.

By the time she had finished maneuvering herself, Ali was back and pulling the covers down to the foot of the bed. She took off her pajama pants and then crawled onto the bed to put the harness on her gorgeous wife. Just the sight of Ashlyn stretched out and waiting for her made the juices start gushing between her legs. She chuckled when she saw where the blonde’s shorts were and decided not to waste time with them either. She stuffed the material through the leg hole of the harness and continued guiding it up the long, muscular thighs she loved so much.

“You’ve already got me so fucking wet Ash. Jesus Christ I’m soaked” she groaned as she slid her hand through her folds and gathered up some of the passion there.

Ashlyn watched her wife lube up the dildo with her own wetness and bit her lip hard. Goddamn that was sexy. Every push on the dildo sent a shot of mild pleasure into the keeper’s clit and Ali knew it. She took her time and made sure Ashlyn got lots of good vibrations.

“Oh, I almost forgot” Ali purred as she leaned over to her side of the bed and grabbed the tiny vibrator that you wore on your finger like a ring. She turned it on to make sure it still worked and grinned devilishly as she tossed it to her keeper. “Here you go, gorgeous.”

“Hurry up” Ashlyn whined. “I want to feel you. I want to watch you ride me Al. Mmmmmm.”

Ali was ready too and just as eager. She gave the dildo one more lubricating stroke with her wet fingers and then climbed on top of her keeper. She hovered over her wife for a few seconds, admiring how beautiful she looked and trying to figure out what it was about her short haircut that was turning her on so much.

“You’re just beautiful Ash” she whispered tenderly and pressed a kiss to her lips. “And that fucking hair is doing things to me...” she growled out and started to lower herself onto the strap-on. “Fuck,
that feels good.”

“Yeah it does” the keeper agreed in a hoarse whimper. “I want your boobs in my mouth.”

Ali leaned forward so her wife, half-way propped up against the headboard, could put her hot mouth to work on her breasts. She started grinding against the dildo at the same time, moving her hips up and back slowly and finding out what felt the best in that position. Her head was already starting to get fuzzy just from Ashlyn’s mouth on her nipples.

“Shit that’s good” the brunette moaned as she enjoyed what her wife was doing with her talented tongue.

Ali kept grinding and changed her pattern to a circular one for several minutes that made Ashlyn moan as the toy pressed against her clit.

“Oh, fuck yes” she exhaled against Ali’s soft, warm skin just beneath her left breast.

The brunette sat up straight and arched her back, pulling her breasts away from her keeper for a second, making her reach for them with her hands instead. Every squeeze, pinch, scratch and tug brought her closer to her release. Ali could feel her orgasm starting to take shape deep down inside her and she worked the dildo harder in pursuit.

“Fuck Ash...yes.”

The keeper moved her long fingers all over Ali’s undulating body. She ghosted a touch down her sides and made her skin erupt in goosebumps. She scratched gently behind her at her gorgeous ass and then squeezed it hard, making the brunette moan loudly in response. Ashlyn caressed the thin, purplish stretch marks near Ali’s hips and knew she would never see them as anything other than beautiful. She looked down and saw the c-section scar just above her dark curls as they rose and fell with Ali’s movements. What a woman this was. What a gorgeous, amazing, strong fucking woman this was.

“You’re so fucking sexy” the blonde husked out and moved her hands back up to Ali’s breasts, loving the feel of her stiff nipples.

Ali stopped grinding and started to move up and down slowly, using her strong thighs to thrust herself up and down on the strap-on. Ashlyn couldn’t take her eyes off of her brunette’s pussy lips, hungrily swallowing the pink dildo time and time again. The brunette gradually increased her pace and enjoyed the pleasurable sensations from the toy against her silky walls.

“Fuck Al” she groaned out, feeling the flush rise up her own chest and neck as she got more and more turned on. “Jesus fucking Christ, I think I’m going to come before you do. Fuck, that’s hot.”

The brunette stopped bouncing and went back to grinding, harder this time and with a little bit more purpose as her orgasm got closer. She could feel it coiling inside her, just waiting to spring. Ali brought her hand to her own clit, circled it a few times and then started to rub it.

“I want to” Ashlyn purred and moved her wife’s hand away. She turned the tiny vibrator on, put it on her finger, near the tip, and then brought it to the outside edge of her wife’s clit.

“Unnnn...oh God...”

The keeper carefully moved her other hand back and forth between her beautiful breasts while she pressed the vibrator all around the outside edges of Ali’s clit. She could feel her wife’s rhythm start to falter as she got closer and closer to her release. Ali was haphazardly grinding, a few strokes to the
left and then one up and two to the right, randomly. Ashlyn brought the tiny ring towards her brunette’s aching clit and gently placed it against the sensitive nub. She watched as Ali’s body came alive as if somebody just shocked it with an electric current.

“Oh my fucking God” she shouted out as her clit exploded with pleasurable sensations from the vibrator pressed against it. “More...please...”

Ashlyn held the tiny ring against her clit again and this time let her wife guide her hand with her own. Ali’s eyes were closed and her head was thrown back and a little to one side as she got closer and closer. Her back was arched and she played with one of her own breasts and held her wife’s hand against her clit with the other. There were a few small beads of sweat near her collar bone and Ashlyn tried to remember every single detail of that moment so she would never forget how magnificent her wife was when she came.

“Yessssss!!!!” Ali shouted two seconds later as her orgasm exploded up from the depths and spread throughout her entire body, sending wave after wave of pleasure through every single nerve-ending. “Oh...fuck...Oh my God.”

The muscles she had been working so hard on in her abdomen contracted and then spasmed as the rest of her body shook its’ way through the orgasm, small breasts bouncing fast. Ali pulled the vibrator away from her sensitive clit and dropped down onto her wife’s chest with a guttural groan. She moved slowly against the toy that was still inside her, just for a minute longer, and then lay quietly on top of her keeper, breathing hard. The brunette pressed hot kisses into Ashlyn’s neck and across her jawline as she tried to catch her breath.

“Fuck, babe” she panted out as she reached her left arm behind her wife’s neck and played with the short hair there. “That felt incredible” she gasped out. “Thank you.”

The blonde moved both of her big hands across Ali’s slightly sweaty back and down to her sexy ass. She caressed the soft skin there and then scratched at it as she enjoyed the comfortable weight of her wife on top of her and in her arms.

“You’re incredible” she breathed out and leaned down to capture Ali’s lips in a heated kiss.

“Oh!” Ali squealed when she felt Ashlyn’s hips thrust up, moving the pink dildo still inside her. She quickly got up on all fours.

“I’m so sorry honey” the keeper apologized and moved both hands between their bodies so she could pull the toy out of her sensitive and tender wife.

Ali dropped onto her right side, next to Ashlyn but away from her injured leg, and let out a sigh and then a chuckle.

“Are you ok baby? I’m really sorry. I couldn’t help it. I didn’t mean to...”

“Ashlyn. Babe, it’s ok” the brunette got up onto her elbow and carefully turned her wife’s face towards her until their eyes met. “Everything’s good. I promise. Stop worrying.”

Ali gave her a sweet kiss to settle her down and then slipped her tongue between her lips to make sure she stayed riled up. They kissed for a few more minutes and then the brunette got up and took the harness off of her keeper. She groaned when she saw how wet her wife was as Ashlyn bent her left leg up and out to the side.

“Fuck Ash” she choked the words out around her mounting desire. “Do you want the strap-on? Or my mouth?”
“Yes please” the blonde answered with a smirk and tried to remember not to move her right leg. She saw the hungry look in her wife’s eyes and felt more passion pool between her legs. “I want that mouth first though.”

“I was hoping you would say that” Ali grinned lasciviously, drove her tongue between her keeper’s legs and moaned loudly.
The good news didn’t come until Friday afternoon but there was still just enough time to make it happen before the 4pm kick-off on Saturday. Anna had replied to Rose Lavelle’s tweet and sent the famous midfielder a direct message. It took Rose a few hours to find it but she did and asked the little girl to send her a picture of she and her sister Lena so she could be sure it was really them. She gave them the direct number for the Breakers general manager and told them to have their mom call him as soon as she could that day.

“We’ve got them” the GM said into the phone late Friday afternoon.

“Are you serious?” Ashlyn questioned, trying to contain her excitement.

“I wouldn’t joke about something like this Ash. We’ve got them. I’m texting you their contact info right now. Just let us know what you need after you talk to them.”

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Saturday, September 25th was a very big day for Ashlyn and the Breakers. The soccer part was simple. If the Breakers won and both North Carolina and Orlando lost then Boston would get the fourth and final spot in the playoffs. It was a must-win game and it was as simple as that. Their opponent was FC Kansas City and they were a very good team. They were just below Boston in the table but too far behind on points to push for that last playoff spot. They, much like the Breakers, were a team in transition. A lot of their older players were retiring and the coaching staff had struggled to build up the required back-ups. Becky Sauerbrunn was the latest player to retire and she was going to be playing in her final game there in Boston that day. She was easily one of the most respected players of the last decade and she had always represented both her club and her country with dignity and class. She was a pretty awesome center back too. Becky had turned 36 years old that June and had been the captain of the club ever since its inception in 2013. Nine years. She must have been drinking from Christie Pearce’s secret fountain of youth or something. And, much like Christie Pearce, Becky had been unceremoniously dumped from the National Team when the coach thought she was too old to contribute any more. She had suffered the same fate that Heather O’Reilly had four years previously. Becky made the 2019 World Cup team but barely saw the field. And she had made the Tokyo Olympic team in 2020 as an alternate and never even saw the bench for any of the games. The good news was that the NWSL still adored her and appreciated her incredible skill set on and off the pitch. Every away game FCKC travelled to this season had turned into a ‘we love Becky’ fest, regardless of the final score.

The Breakers planned a special ceremony for the beloved player as well. Ashlyn was supposed to say a few words before the game and present her old rival and occasional teammate with a plaque.
commemorating her final NWSL game. The Breakers staff had coordinated with the KC staff back in July and Becky had requested Ashlyn. The two had been collegiate rivals in the ACC for two years, 2006 and 2007, and Ashlyn’s UNC Tarheels had owned Becky’s Virginia Cavaliers. Then they had played together for one season for the Washington Freedom in the WUSA back in 2010. They had played together on the U-19 National Team in 2003 and 2004, even winning the bronze medal together in the 2004 World Cup. They had been friends once but Ashlyn had let many of her youth national team friendships fall away as she fought the bitter disappointment of not getting called up to the senior roster.

“I just want you to be careful and pace yourself Ash, that’s all I’m saying.” Ali furrowed her brow in frustration as she drove them to the stadium late Saturday morning. “It hasn’t even been two weeks...” she couldn’t continue as the fear closed up her throat.

The keeper looked at her wife from her spot in the passenger seat and frowned. She knew Ali was just trying to protect her. She knew her beautiful brunette just wanted what was best for her. Yes, it was a big day with a lot going on and Ashlyn wasn’t at her best yet. She was meeting Anna, Lena and their parents for a stadium tour and a meet and greet with the players before the game. That was going to be very emotional for the keeper – meeting and thanking those girls for helping Drew that awful day. It was going to take a lot out of her and probably make her head hurt. Then she was doing the pre-game Becky Sauerbrunn tribute and presentation which was also going to be emotional, but in a different way. She was nervous about walking on crutches and speaking in front of 20,000 plus people. And, if she was being totally honest, she was nervous about debuting her new hairdo to the world. In addition, Lifetime TV was airing the interview she had done with Heather O’Reilly in the hour-long pre-game show and that was already making her sweat a little. And then there was the fucking soccer game to sit through without losing her mind. It killed her to not be part of such an important game. It was a tall order but she was just going to do the best she could and hope for the best. The keeper saw the tears collecting in the corner of her wife’s eye and reached across the console to caress her thigh.

“I’m a little scared too honey” she admitted honestly. She looked over her shoulder at Drew, happily yammering away in the backseat and looking out the window. “But I promise I’ll be smart. I promise.”

“So you’ll wear a hat?” Ali challenged?

“I’ll wear a hat as soon as the game starts...”

“Ashlyn” the brunette whined. “That’s the opposite of smart. You know you’re supposed to keep your stitches clean and dry and safe for a full two weeks until they’re ready to come out. You don’t want to get an infection now after you’ve been so careful...”

“But I want to look good when everybody sees my new hair” she replied shyly and looked away.

Ali knew her wife could be vain, but who couldn’t be? What she was just realizing was how insecure she was about her short hair. It surprised the brunette as she kept driving and thinking. It was a big deal for a public, semi-famous person to make such a striking change to their appearance. Part of what Ashlyn had been known for, aside from her skills on the pitch and her tattoos, was her beautiful long, blonde hair. Lord knows her sponsors loved it and Ali fully expected a shitstorm after they all got a look at the new haircut today. What surprised the brunette was how nervous Ashlyn was about it. She knew her wife had been thinking about cutting her hair for several years and they talked about it every once in a while, agent to athlete. Ali had just assumed that her keeper was ready to enter the next phase of her celebrity, the phase where she cared less about meeting expectations of others and cared more about being her best self. But maybe she wasn’t that ready after all. It wasn’t a
perfect cut either and her natural, light brown hair color was almost more prevalent at the back and sides of her head than the longer, blonde hair on top. It almost looked like a nice highlighting job and Ashlyn totally pulled it off. Which was good because she wasn’t allowed to dye it or anything while her head was healing. It made the brunette sad to think her beautiful wife was doubting herself. Maybe keeping her stitches uncovered for six or seven hours wouldn’t be the end of the world. She hoped.

“Babe” Ali put a hand on top of her wife’s, still on her thigh. “You look gorgeous. And your hair looks awesome and everybody that’s seen you has told you the same thing, right?”

“Not Mrs. Riley.”

“Well, ok, so your 70-year old cleaning lady doesn’t love it yet, but she’ll come around. She just doesn’t like new things, that’s all” Ali shrugged and smiled at her wife.

“God, remember how much she complained about the new dishwasher?” Ashlyn laughed.

“And the new vacuum cleaner?” Ali added and rolled her eyes. “So, you get my point.”

“I guess” the blonde sighed.

They were quiet for a couple of minutes as Ali struggled with what the best thing for her wife would be that day.

“Alright, but, please Ash, just be careful...”

“I will” she grinned at Ali and her dimpled appeared.

“And the hat goes on as soon as the game starts” Ali clarified.

“I swear” Ashlyn held her hand up like she was swearing an oath and nodded.

“And you have to stay off your leg as much as you can” the brunette looked sideways at her wife and gave her a threatening raised eyebrow.

“Al...”

“I’m serious Ashlyn” Ali was getting exasperated. “I can’t even believe we have to have this conversation. That’s your future wrapped up in that cast. You can’t play soccer if your damn leg doesn’t heal well.”

Ashlyn turned to look out the window without saying anything, but left her hand on her wife’s thigh. The mood in the truck changed and the only sound was Drew’s adorable running commentary in the backseat. But Ali knew she had just opened the door to a room her wife wasn’t ready to step into yet. Neither was Ali, honestly. None of the doctors had told her she couldn’t or wouldn’t play again. But none of them had told her she would make a full recovery either. It was just too early in the process. The surgery to set the bones in her right leg had gone very well and everything looked good so far. But everybody also knew how much harder it was to come back from an injury when you were 36 years old instead of 26. After a few long, quiet minutes, Ashlyn turned back and looked out the windshield as they got closer to the stadium.

“I love you Ali” she smiled softly at her wife and squeezed her thigh. “I promise I’ll be smart and take it easy today.”

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Ali, Ashlyn and Drew waited in one of the small meeting rooms in the office portion of the stadium complex. Ashlyn sat on a couch with her right leg up on a coffee table and watched Ali reading a book about dinosaurs to their son at the other end of the same couch. It was almost 1pm and the Kovacs family was due to arrive any minute. The Kriegers had made the rounds, greeting everyone and thanking them for their help with Ashlyn’s special guests. Then they had gone down to the cafeteria and eaten lunch. Ali had helped her wife make some final adjustments to her outfit and make-up and hair and they were now just waiting for their guests. The keeper had been disappointed by the limitations to her outfit because of her cast. There were really only two things she could wear on her lower half: loose, wide-legged shorts or athletic warm up pants that were wide-legged enough to accommodate the big cast that covered her lower right leg from just below her knee to halfway up her foot. The keeper had chosen a pair of black track pants with a zipper that went from the bottom cuff up almost to her knee. They were perfect and comfortable and didn’t look too awful. She wore a neat three-button Boston Breakers polo shirt, in Breakers blue, and a black, hightop Nike sneaker on her left foot. Ashlyn loved that the blue of her cast was almost the same as the Breakers blue of her polo. Drew had chosen the color well. She had let Ali paint the nails on her right foot blue to match. The Breakers media crew was going to film the stadium tour and much of the meeting with the Kovacs family and wanted to mic Ashlyn up but the keeper asked them not to, not at first anyway. She knew she was going to get emotional and she wanted to make sure the family was comfortable with everything the media team had planned.

Finally, they heard voices coming down the hallway and Ali and Ashlyn stood up expectantly, the brunette holding Drew on her hip. The Breakers staffer showed the Kovacs into the room and everybody smiled at each other nervously. Ali saw the camera just outside the door, filming the family’s arrival and, hopefully, the first meeting. She looked at the staffer and shook her head ‘no’.

After making the introductions, the staffer smiled politely and excused herself, closing the door behind her and leaving the two families alone.

“His cast matches yours” Lena, the younger girl, blurted out as soon as she noticed.

“It does” Ashlyn agreed with a grin. “Technically, he got his first so I copied him” she added. “Do you like the shark I tried to paint on there for him?”

Ali sat down on the couch with Drew on her lap so it was easier for the girls to see him. He was being shy but the brunette knew he would relax and open up soon. He looked adorable in his ‘Harris’ keeper jersey with the cut-off left arm. Tammye had sewed the now short sleeve so it looked presentable.

“That’s a shark?” Anna asked, trying to look at Drew’s cast.

“Well, it’s supposed to be” Ashlyn chuckled. “Have you ever tried to make a 2-1/2 year old sit still long enough to paint a shark on his cast?”

They all laughed, except for the dad who didn’t speak much English. Ali had tried to get a Hungarian translator but hadn’t been able to find one on such short notice. Once Ashlyn had spoken with Mrs. Kovacs on the phone she was able to fill in a lot of blanks for her wife. Natalia and Vilmos Kovacs were the mom and dad and they were all originally from Hungary. Anna was nine and Lena was seven. Natalia had emigrated from Hungary with her two daughters almost five years ago along with two of her best friends and their young children. The plan had been to live together and pool their resources so two of the women at a time could work while the third watched all of the children. Their husbands were all still in Hungary, working and sending them money every month. Once they had enough money to get separate apartments, one of the husbands would come over and reunite with his family and find work here in the Boston area. So far Natalia and Vilmos were the second couple of the three to achieve their goal.
And it was true about painting the shark on Drew’s cast. Ashlyn had spent a lot of time with him up in the studio when she first came home from the hospital. She couldn’t do much else with her concussion, mild though it was. So she played classical music and painted and drew and played with her son and often her mom too. The shark on Drew’s cast was actually pretty good, considering it had been done in small increments over the span of three or four days.

“Can I see your shark?” Lena asked Drew as she sat on the couch next to Ali.

He looked at the girl and then at her sister standing in front of Ali’s lap and then back at Lena. Ali patted the side of his leg and kissed his head and he smiled up at her. Then he stuck his left arm out and showed them his cast with a big grin.

“Shawk” he said and made a chomping motion with his mouth that made everybody laugh again.

Ali got up, hoping Ashlyn would stay seated with her leg up, and went over to the table at the end of the room where all the Breakers swag was spread out for the Kovacs family. She held up the signed Rose Lavelle jersey and Anna made a beeline for it.

“Mama, can I change my shirt?” she asked excitedly.

“Yes girls, be good though” their mother chuckled as she sat down next to Ashlyn on the couch. “Say thank you!”

Both girls eagerly took off their shirts and put on their new Breakers jerseys. Lena loved her signed Harris keeper jersey. They looked at the scarves and hats and magnets and soccer balls and posters on the table and squealed in excitement. Ali helped them fill two big bags full of anything they wanted, talking to them about soccer and what positions they played and who their favorite players in the league were. Vilmos took one of the tiny soccer balls and waved it towards Drew who hopped off the couch and ambled towards it. They kicked the ball back and forth, very sedately on the other side of the coffee table, Drew laughing the whole time.

“I want to thank you, very much, for helping my family that day” Natalia said as she held Ashlyn’s hand. Her accent was about halfway between her husband’s very thick one and her daughters’ barely-there one. “So many people do not help” she shook her head sadly. “I didn’t believe them when they told me. Vilmos showed me your map and then I knew it was true.” She took a breath and smiled broadly at the keeper. “Thank you.”

“I was happy to help. I wish more people took a few minutes and helped other people” Ashlyn responded quietly. She was having a hard time not letting her emotions get the best of her. “I...I don’t even know how to thank your girls for coming back that day...for taking care of my boy” she quickly wiped a tear out of the corner of her eye with her free hand. “And your husband too. I just don’t know what to say, except thank you and that hardly seems enough.”

“I asked my girls why they did that. Why they went back to such a dangerous place” Natalia explained, keeping her voice lower so the girls wouldn’t have to go back to that day if they didn’t want to. They had seen some terrible things too in the aftermath of the accident. “Anna, she told me they heard screaming and then a big crash and she thought of you and your son and wanted to know if you were ok.” She paused and nodded reflectively. “I didn’t teach her to do that. I teach her to be good and help when she can. I asked her again, why? But she just shrug her shoulders. Lena said that you were friendly and had a nice face. And the football.” The woman grinned. “Children... they always know who is kind and who is not.”

It was 1:30pm by the time they left the room and started the stadium tour. Ashlyn had spoken to the media team and set the ground rules for the excursion. Focus on Ashlyn and the two girls. Mr & Mrs
Kovacs preferred to stay in the background, as did Ali and Drew. And no close-ups of her head wound. It was pretty unattractive and Ashlyn didn’t want some weirdo counting the number or type of stitches she had. The keeper got mic’d up and they were off. They spent almost an hour touring the huge facility. They started in the offices and everybody was welcoming and friendly to the family. They all piled into one of the long golf carts and drove around the concourses in the stadium, pointing out all the different areas where the vendors set up to sell merchandise and refreshments for both the Breakers and the Revolution games. They went out onto the pitch so the girls could kick the soccer ball around with Ali a little bit. They were surprised out there by the coach who came over and greeted them all warmly. Ashlyn was always shocked when the tough coach showed his soft side. He couldn’t have been sweeter with the girls or their parents. They got back in the cart and Ali steered them back inside and past the visitors locker room before coming to a halt outside the Breakers locker room.

“Would you guys like to meet the team?” Ashlyn asked with a twinkle in her eye. She hadn’t told them about this. “It’s ok if you don’t want to” the keeper started to shyly walk away from the door when the girls hesitated to answer her.

“No! We do, we do want to meet them!” they both yelled breathlessly.

Ashlyn laughed loudly and told them to wait one second while she made sure everybody was dressed. It was 2:30 and she had planned it this way so they could say hi to the team before they went out for warm-ups at 3pm. The media team laughed when they edited the footage later because the mic picked up Ashlyn warning her teammates to be nice. She needn’t have worried though. Those teammates were big fans of Anna and Lena and wouldn’t soon forget the sight of the two of them trying to help little Drew after the accident. The visit was great and the girls loved it. It was their favorite part of the tour, by far. Ali excused herself and went out into the corridor fifteen minutes into the visit to take Josie from her father. Ken and Vicki had picked up Tammye and Josie for the game and would head up to the Knight-Harris suite while Ali finished with the Kovacs group.

This was Josie’s first visit to the stadium and the three-month old was outfitted in the smallest ‘Harris’ onesie anybody had ever seen. It was still too big on her. It was also the first time the team had met the newest addition to the Breakers family and they all went crazy over her and her red hair.

“What is it with your kids and adorable hair?” Kristie Mewis asked as she took the baby from Ali’s arms.

“Listen, don’t feel bad if she fusses” Ashlyn explained to the whole room. “She’s just a fussy baby girl but we love her anyway, don’t we Drew?”

“Jo-see” he grinned and buried his face in Ashlyn’s good leg, almost pushing her over.

Tasha Dowie steadied the keeper with a strong hand in her back and an easy grin.

“Little man looks tired” the striker offered as she ruffled his thick, dark hair.

“Yeah he missed his nap today” Ali made a frightened face. “The countdown to full meltdown is on.”

“You guys have to hide me on the bench!” Ashlyn joked and patted her son on his back.

Anna and Lena got high-fives from all the players and they signed one of their soccer balls too before the tour ended and they regrouped back in the corridor. As they started to get back into the cart for the ride back to the main concourse the door to the visitors locker room opened and Becky Sauerbrunn came out and walked over to Ashlyn. They hugged for a long minute and then one of
the best defenders to ever play in the NWSL turned around and introduced herself to the Kovacs family, making both Anna and Lena’s jaws drop. She took some selfies and gave them each a signed postcard of her in her KC uniform with a personalized note. Becky spoke with Ali for a couple of minutes while everybody got into the cart again. They had played against each other twice in college, before Ali’s injury. Penn State wasn’t in the ACC like UNC and Virginia, but all three schools were women’s soccer powerhouses and faced each other almost every year in the college cup tournament.

“I still remember that nutmeg Kriegs” Becky chuckled. “Sophomore year, quarterfinals of the college cup. You made me look bad in front of my new boyfriend” she shook her head. “It’s good to see you. You’ve got a beautiful family and I love what you’re doing with your company” she nodded approvingly.

“Thanks” Ali blushed a little but recovered, surprised that Becky Sauerbrunn remembered her at all. “Too bad you turned out to be such a slacker” the brunette joked, making the defender laugh out loud. “Damned shame.”

Right on cue, Drew started to lose it so Ali hustled into the cart and everybody waved goodbye to Becky as they drove off. By the time they walked into the suite, fifteen minutes later, Drew was ready to fall asleep in Ali’s arms. He was too heavy for her to carry those days when her core wasn’t as strong as usual, and he was extra heavy when he was dead weight like that. They hadn’t thought this last part through well enough. Ashlyn couldn’t help with either child because of her crutches and broken leg, so Natalia had ended up carrying Josie up to the suite while Vilmos guided the girls. She didn’t mind. She got a good hit of ‘baby’ smell and loved every minute of it.

Ken took Drew from his daughter as soon as they walked through the door, with a stern look on his face.

“Thanks Dad” Ali exhaled and pressed both hands to her stomach for a few minutes as she surveyed the area. “I think we’ll just put him at one end of the couch and hope for the best.”

Ashlyn introduced the Kovacs to the rest of the people already in the suite and invited them to sit in the seats outside to watch warm-ups. She told them to help themselves to anything and then started to show them where the two bathrooms were, just down the hall, but Whitney took over and told her best friend to sit down and put her leg up. The keeper rolled her eyes but did as told. Her leg was already throbbing and she still had to go down and do the pregame stuff. She had forty-five minutes to elevate it and be still and that’s what she did. She sat in one of the swivel chairs and put her leg up in Ali’s lap in the next swivel chair, making the brunette chuckle. The big screen tv in the room was tuned to the Lifetime TV pregame show and they listened to Heather O’Reilly, Julie Foudy, Aly Wagner and Jenn Hildreth talk about Becky Sauerbrunn and her remarkable career.

The mood in the suite was light and relaxed as people snacked and drank and talked as they waited for the 4pm kickoff. Tammye brought both Ali and Ashlyn bottles of water and put a plate of fruit down on the table between their two chairs. She kissed her daughter on the cheek before going out to check on the Kovacs family. Dom was on call that day but he was hoping he could stay right where he was, sitting in the outdoor seats with Sydney, Sandi, Whitney, Ryan, Ken, Vicki and Cash. There was a small group of K-H employees there too: Jared, Jen, Marcy, Paige, Jerry, and Holly the IT wiz.

At 3:30pm the teams went back into the locker room to change into their game jerseys and, after the next commercial break, Lifetime TV aired Ashlyn’s interview with Heather O’Reilly. Everybody in the suite got quiet and the outdoor people came inside to watch too. Ali felt her wife’s body tense up and she wished she were sitting close enough to touch her. All she could reach was her cast and her toes. She closed her hand around the end of her wife’s foot and hoped the skin to skin contact would
help. Ashlyn wiggled her big toe inside Ali’s warm hand and smiled appreciatively at her.

It was only a twelve-minute segment but it seemed to last forever. Ashlyn spoke eloquently and emotionally about her lifetime of struggling with mild depression. She talked about having an amazing support system and some of the best friends in the world to help her get through the hard times.

“I talk to a therapist when I feel like I need more help or if I’m facing something tougher than usual” she explained. “And probably more than half of the viewers watching this right now just gasped” she mimicked the behavior. “And that’s because there’s such a stigma about mental health in this country, the whole world really, but especially in this country. I’m successful, I’m happy, I’m healthy – well, most of the time anyway” she chuckled and pointed at her cast. “I’ve been blessed with so many wonderful things in life and I’m thankful for them every day. But even someone like me, as lucky as I am and as successful as I’ve been, even I struggle and get depressed sometimes.”

“So what’s your message today Ash?” Heather asked, thoughtfully. “What do you want people to know?”

“I want to tell them that you’re not alone. You’re not the only one feeling those things. You’re not a bad person or a person who’s less worthy of anything because you’re fighting some mental health issue. There are a lot of us out here fighting the same battles. Sometimes we win and sometimes we lose. Both of those things are ok as long as you keep getting up and trying again the next day. The only way you can fail is to give up. So don’t give up. Keep fighting. Ask for help when you need it. And, this goes for everybody, be there for somebody in your life who you think might be going through a hard time. Take a few minutes out of your day and ask them how they’re doing. Make it ok to talk about mental illness. Help us lose the stigma so we can all talk about it and help each other through it.”

“That’s really powerful” Heather cleared her throat, clearly moved by her friend’s words and passion. “Why now though? What’s motivated you to start this discussion now?”

Ashlyn blew a breath out and looked down for a long minute as Heather waited patiently for a reply.

“You know, it’s been a rough few years for me personally. It’s hard to complain though because some of the best things I could ever hope for have happened to me at the same time” she gave a small smile and took a deep breath. “When my Grandmother passed away 3-1/2 years ago it really hit me hard. It hit my whole family hard. She was truly the glue that held everybody together and we sort of floundered without her. It was a sad, scary time and it took me a very long time to come to terms with losing her. It wasn’t until my son was born a year later that I really felt more good than bad. Anybody with kids will tell you, there’s nothing better than holding your baby to help you put everything into perspective pretty damned quick.” She smiled broadly.

“I’ll take your word for it” Heather, still childless, teased and returned the smile.

“But then this year, this summer has been one hell of a summer for my family and, uh...” she fought for control of her voice and tried to swallow her emotions. “I’m sorry” she whispered as she wiped a tear from her cheek.

“It’s ok Ash” Heather soothed. “Take your time.”

“My wife has been my rock through everything, God bless her. And as I looked back at the past 3-1/2 or 4 years, every single good thing in my life had something to do with her. I don’t know how many people know this or not, but we work together too. She runs our company and helps a lot of young, mostly female, athletes get good representation as they start their professional sports careers.
She’s amazing.”

“I don’t think I need to, but I can absolutely vouch for this” Heather added, looking towards the camera and being serious. “I would like to be like your wife when I grow up” she quipped.

“Right?” Ashlyn grinned. “She’s incredible.” The keeper took another breath and steadied herself. “Well, she almost died giving birth to our daughter and...”

“Oh my God.” Heather looked stunned at the revelation. The Krieger family drama had truly been limited to their innermost circle. “That’s awful...”

“Yeah, it was...it was the most horrible thing I’ve ever been through. And I wasn’t even the one giving birth or being born. They’re both fine now, thank God” she clarified quickly. “It’s been a hard summer and we’re all grateful. But I struggled, a lot. And then just when everything was starting to feel normal and good again, this random car accident happened and here we go again.”

“Well Ashlyn, you were almost killed by that car as you walked with your young son during your off-week two weeks ago. We’ve all seen the video, I’m sure, and it was just terrifying to watch. I can’t imagine how frightening it was to experience it.”

“It was awful and I’m so sad for the families of the people who lost their lives and for everybody else who was injured. As I was struggling with all this new sadness and heaviness I just kept feeling like somebody or something was trying to send me a message this summer. Life is short and you never know how much time you have on this earth and all of those clichés you hear over and over and over again. They’re all true! Life is frustratingly short and it flies by so damned fast. One minute you’re holding your newborn in the palms of your hands and the next you’re carrying a 2-1/2 year old toddler on your back down the street. It’s just wild. The message I got this summer is carpe diem. Seize the damned day Heather. And I don’t want to wait anymore to start having these conversations about mental health. I can’t wait for someone else to step forward first. I don’t want to wait to have these hard conversations and keep avoiding them because they’re awkward. It’s time to start talking about it so it’s not uncomfortable anymore. It’s important to so many people, way more people than you can even imagine are struggling right now with feeling depressed or alone or like maybe they’re not sure why life is worth living anymore. Those people need our help and they’re not getting it because they’re afraid to talk about it. And that’s what I’m going to change.”

“I think that’s just great Ash. That’s good stuff right there. I’m really proud of you. Do you have a plan worked out yet?”

“It’s not finalized yet. There’s a group of us working on it though. And I give you my word, I’m not going away about this.” Ashlyn’s eyes flashed with emotion and it was clear to anybody watching that she was as serious about this as she had ever been about anything in her life. “And I really want to thank you and Lifetime TV for letting me talk about it today. Let’s keep talking about it.”

Everybody in the suite came over and hugged, kissed or squeezed Ashlyn as the interview ended and went to commercial break.

“I talked about you too Whit, but they must have edited you out” she looked sheepishly at her best friend as she approached and gave the keeper a huge hug.

“I love you Ash. You inspire me every damned day” Whitney spoke softly as they hugged.

A Breakers staffer knocked on the door of the suite to bring Ashlyn down to the pitch for the pre-game ceremony and the suite stayed quiet for several minutes after they left, everyone just trying to process everything they had heard and felt during Ashlyn’s interview.
“Je-sus” Sydney said as Ali took the seat next to hers outside. “I can’t believe she just fucking did that. How proud are you?” she grinned at her best friend and patted her leg.

Jenn Hildreth was down on the pitch doing a live interview with Becky Sauerbrunn when Ashlyn got down there. Ashlyn just heard the tail end of it.

“How are you feeling about the ceremony the Breakers are having for you here in a few minutes?”

“Oh I’m pumped. This is one of the original teams, they’ve been in all three versions of the women’s professional soccer league and they’re a classy organization. This is a perfect example. And I’m so thankful that Ashlyn Harris agreed to do the presentation for me.”

“So that was how that happened. You requested her?”

“I sure did. I can’t think of anybody I respect or admire more than Ashlyn. We’ve been teammates and rivals and I’ve never faced anybody more competitive in my entire life. She taught me a lot about how to be a good leader and a good captain too. A lot of people don’t remember this, but she was the captain of the U-19 National team that I was on and we won the bronze medal in the World Cup that year. There are a whole lot of us who would follow her anywhere. She’s just the best. And as great as she is on the pitch, she’s an even better human being off of it. I mean, that interview she just gave, we all watched that in the locker room as we were getting ready to come back out and you could hear a pin drop. She’s a goalkeeper so we all know she’s brave and fearless. But this is taking it to a whole other level. I’m proud of her and inspired by her and I want in on the group she’s working with to start talking about mental health. It’s about time. Thank you Ashlyn Harris.”

In another few minutes the teams walked out and everyone sang the National Anthem and took their seats again. The public address announcer introduced Ashlyn and she crutched her way to the area in front of the two teams where a stand had been set up with the commemorative plaque on it, covered with a small FCKC flag. The crowd roared and got back on its’ feet to cheer for their beloved keeper. Ashlyn was blown away. She had not expected that kind of response. She wasn’t sure if it was a reaction to the interview or just the fans way of telling her they were glad she hadn’t been killed in the freak car accident eleven days earlier. As the thunderous ovation hit her like big waves from all directions she stood there, more than a little embarrassed. This was supposed to be Becky’s moment. She looked at Becky standing in her place by the official, clapping just as hard as everybody else, and they shared a smile. She was supposed to be at Ashlyn’s side right now but, classy as ever, she let the keeper and her adoring fans have their moment.

The jumbotron had close-up shots of Ashlyn and then different shots of the crowd and even a shot of Ali. The brunette stood holding Josie in her arms with tears streaming down her face and the biggest smile in the world on her lips. It was an incredible moment that nobody had been expecting. The game commentators finally just shut up and let the applause reverberate through the entire stadium. The keeper tried to talk into the microphone in her hand a few different times but the people just weren’t ready. Finally, as the crowd started to die down her voice was barely audible.

“Hey now, thank you everybody. I really appreciate that. I love you all too. But, hey, hey, listen...we’ve got a pretty important game to play here and you’re totally messing with everything the producers had planned.” She laughed, as did most of the players, and her dimpled grin came out.

“Seriously, they’re in a control room somewhere just cussing at us all.”

It took another couple of minutes but Ashlyn finally got things settled down again.

“I’m very honored to be here this afternoon to talk about one of the greatest players to ever play soccer in America...” Ashlyn began and continued with the prepared speech she had memorized for Becky’s last game.
She spoke for ten minutes, Becky standing beside her and grinning the entire time, and then they took a bunch of pictures with the plaque and then the defender said a few words of her own. The crowd gave her another big ovation when she was done, but both of Becky’s ovations put together hadn’t been half as big as the one Ashlyn had received.

“Sorry about stealing your thunder” Ashlyn apologized as they hugged at the end of the ceremony. “Bet you wished you picked Rose now” she teased and smiled.

“Nah” Becky replied with a warm smile. “I couldn’t have planned it any better. You just made me famous. My little ceremony will be all over the internet tonight and I have you to thank for that.” They hugged again before Becky turned to return to her team and Ashlyn crutched off the pitch to return to the suite. “Now go get off your feet and put your leg up!” Becky winked and jogged away, braid swinging behind her.

Ashlyn rolled her eyes and watched her go, certain she would never see another like her in her lifetime. The keeper was grateful she had gotten so many chances to play against her over the years. She took her Boston Breakers snapback from the staffer and put it on her head, carefully avoiding and then covering her stitches. Ashlyn turned and looked for her wife in the outdoor seats of their suite. She waved when she saw her beautiful brunette and Ali gave her a big thumbs up when she saw the hat on her head and then blew her wife a kiss.

The game started about fifteen minutes before the keeper made it back up to the suite and it was a good one. Both teams were uptight after the protracted pregame festivities but settled into a good rhythm in about the eleventh minute or so. Ashlyn sat in the back row of the outdoor seats with her leg propped up between her mother and Whitney’s seats in front of her. She sat next to Lena during the first half and then the two girls changed seats so Anna could sit next to the keeper for the second half. Ali, with Josie wrapped up across her chest in the baby wrap, sat on the other side of the keeper. It was almost like she was guarding her wife’s injured head and leg even though she never said a word about either. Drew woke up just after halftime and he was cranky and still tired. The 90-minute nap was better than nothing but he was used to a good, 3-hour nap and would feel the effects for the rest of the evening. They all would. Ken brought him to his mothers and Ashlyn snuggled him on her lap and pressed kisses into his sweaty head.

“How you doing babe?” Ali asked, tilting her head close to her wife’s and watching her face closely for a response.

“I’m good” Ashlyn smiled softly. “If we can win this damned game I’ll be doing great” she leaned over and pecked Ali’s lips.

The brunette gave her keeper a challenging look and kept her face right where it was, in Ashlyn’s space. The blonde sighed and slumped her shoulders just a bit.

“Ok, I feel about the way he looks” she nodded her head at their pink-faced, exhausted, cranky, worn-out son. “But I’ll be ok. The hard parts are all done.”

Ali reached over and caressed her arm as she leaned up for another quick kiss which Ashlyn readily gave her.

“You did great today honey. I’m so proud of you.”

About fifteen minutes into the second half the visitors started arriving in the suite. Bob and Jonathan Kraft were the first ones to stop in and greet the Krieger family and their guests.

“Don’t get up” Bob Kraft said with a chuckle as he put his hands on Ashlyn’s shoulders and gave
them a squeeze from behind.

Ali scrambled to her feet and offered her seat to the elder Kraft. She talked with Jonathan about the game and introduced him to Josie while Bob sat down and spent a solid fifteen minutes watching the game and talking with Ashlyn and Drew. The keeper introduced him to the Kovacs as he got up to go and he went around to the other end of the row of seats so he could shake Vilmos’ and Natalia’s hands and thank them for coming. He took a couple of minutes and praised the girls for being so brave and good and helping Drew the day of the accident. Ali made sure to introduce both Krafts to Tammye because, somehow, none of the Harrises had been around any of the times the owner had stopped by previously.

Steven Dudley and his wife and daughters were next but they didn’t stay long. He gave Ali a bigger hug than usual and she was puzzled for a minute until she realized he must have seen Ashlyn’s interview.

“Are you doing ok?” he asked sincerely as he looked from his former employee to her baby girl and back. Ali was dressed in a loose-fitting, comfortable, knee-length, sleeveless, black dress. It was one of the rare times she didn’t have supportive Breakers gear on, except for the Breakers necklace and earrings and bandana she had wrapped around her wrist. She knew she’d have Josie wrapped on her chest most of the afternoon and be hot and uncomfortable in her Breakers jersey or t-shirt that were both still a little tight on her. “Is there anything you need? Anything I can do?”

“Oh Steven, you’re very sweet” she smiled warmly at him. “But I’m all better now and Josie’s getting there too. We just have to get her iron up a little bit more and she’ll be perfect” she explained, holding open the top of the baby wrap to show him her baby girl.

“I uh, I can’t tell you what a shock that was to hear today Ali” his face was serious and he looked down at the floor nervously. “I just wanted to tell you how glad I am to see you looking so good. And your daughter is beautiful.”

They chatted about business for a few more minutes and made plans to get together for lunch sometime before the holidays rushed in. Ali did enjoy their lunches. It was always nice to talk to another successful businessperson. She understood a lot more about why he had done some of the things he had done while she worked for him. She still didn’t like them or necessarily agree with them, but it was easier for her to see things from his perspective.

Cat Whitehill and her family stopped by to meet Ashlyn’s children for the very first time. Cat wasted no time and walked up behind the blonde and hugged her tightly around her shoulders and held her like that for a full two minutes. It was a slow, but steady, stream of ex-teammates, coaches, trainers, and some other athletes from the local sports teams who all wanted to tell their favorite keeper that they were glad she was still alive. The Patriots were out of town for an away game the next day or several of them would have been there too. It was touching, but exhausting and Ali could see the almost imperceptible strain on her wife’s face. The brunette shared a look with Tammye but both women knew there was nothing to be done, but worry.

The Breakers won the game when Tasha Dowie drilled a shot from just inside the 18. The thing had flames behind it as it screamed past three defenders, including Becky Sauerbrunn. The Brit ran and picked up the ball, cradled it and pointed right at Ashlyn. The keeper waved at Tasha once the crowd sat back down and she could see her teammate entrusting the ball to one of the assistant coaches near the bench. The striker blew her a kiss and pointed at her again before getting back into position for the final minute of the match. It was a sweet moment and a great way to finish the game. Boston won, 3-2 and did everything they could to secure a place in the playoffs. North Carolina’s game had already ended and they had lost so that was one bullet dodged. Everything hinged on the game in
Orlando being played later that evening. Ashlyn found herself praying for a miracle, which just felt greedy considering everything her family had been through in the last three months. She was profoundly aware of just how lucky all four members of her family had been that summer. It was a humbling, life-altering situation to be in and they had all come out the other side of it ok. Ashlyn smiled broadly as she looked down at the pitch and decided to just hope for the best for her team instead.
Lesbianing 101

Chapter Notes

I could not resist the title....all I can think of is Pennsatucky from OITNB tattling to Healey. "They lesbianing..." lol

The alternate title was "How Many Benches Are There in Provincetown?"

“She looks beautiful” Ashlyn said softly as she kissed Ali’s cheek. “Just like her mother.”

It was two weekends later, Columbus Day weekend, and the brunette had just gotten their almost four-month old daughter dressed for her christening service that Sunday morning. It had been good to have this weekend to look forward to and focus on after the Breakers heartbreaking end to their season. Orlando had won their game and claimed the fourth and final spot in the playoffs, leaving Boston on the outside looking in. To make matters worse, they had only missed by one stinking point. All they needed was one more point and they would have tied with Orlando and gotten the playoff spot due to goals against during the season. If they had been able to salvage any of the ten losses and turn just one of them into a draw they would have continued into the postseason. It stung, bitterly, and the whole team was upset and almost disconsolate. Even the younger players felt it, which was good because the veterans could use that next season to help motivate and teach them. The young ones had come to the team when times were so good and all the Breakers did was win. They hadn’t gotten good until enough of the older players had been tired of losing so much. Maybe this season was a self-adjustment that would turn next season back into a winning campaign again. They could only hope.

Josie was getting bigger but she was still very small. Her anemia was almost completely gone and they were hoping she would be ready to start eating solid foods soon. On the whole, she was hitting her developmental milestones later than Drew had hit his. But that didn’t really surprise anybody. Ashlyn and Ali had to remind each other all the time not to measure her progress against her brother. Josie was her own little person and she was going to do things her own way, in her own time. The stronger she got the happier she became. She could be very chatty when she wanted to be, blessing them with all sorts of vowel sounds that were peppered with a smile or a giggle or even sometimes a full belly laugh. Josie loved music and responded almost immediately to it, regardless of what style or genre it was. She was good at grabbing things and reaching for things and she was just figuring out how to hold her head up good and strong. She was sleeping for six hours at night too which meant Ali was only getting up once with her, around 1:30am, in the middle of the night.

She was not a fan of bath time and she hated tummy time. If you wanted to hear Josie cry, all you had to do was wait for the three times a day one of them lay on the floor with her and tried to get her to lift her head up and look at them. Those were some of the longest ten minutes of their lives and even Persey wanted nothing to do with it. Josie was a tough crowd and even goofy Ashlyn had a difficult time making her laugh or smile sometimes. The keeper joked with her wife that their daughter must be a genius who just didn’t appreciate their low-brow humor. What Josie did like was her big brother. She followed him everywhere with her eyes whenever they were in the same room. She turned her head towards the sound of his voice and smiled when she saw him.

Drew, for his part, was pretty indifferent towards his sister. He got aggravated with her when she
grabbed something he was playing with but eventually learned that he just had to set himself up someplace out of her reach. She wasn’t close to crawling yet and had no way to get closer to him or his toys without some help. The biggest challenge for Drew that October was trying to learn how to use the potty. It was slow going and both his moms agreed that they should push it off until November. Maybe he wasn’t as ready as they thought he was. Maybe the cast on his arm had something to do with it. All they knew was that it wasn’t working and they didn’t want him to get worried about it. It’s not like they weren’t knee-deep in diapers with Josie already anyway, one more month wasn’t going to matter at all.

“Thank you honey” Ali smiled at her sweet wife and then took in her appearance as she picked Josie up off the changing table. “Mama looks beautiful too” the brunette said into her daughter’s cheek as she smooched it. “Doesn’t she?” Ali settled Josie on her hip and then reached behind Ashlyn’s neck and pulled her in for a kiss. She let her fingers caress the soft, brown hair there and smiled against her lips. “MmmmHmmm” she hummed the answer to her own question.

Ashlyn was going to be in her cast for at least another eight weeks and she had refused to wear warm-up pants to her daughter’s christening and baptism service. She bought two pairs of less-expensive dress pants, one black and one grey, and cut the right leg off just below her cast. Her mom had hemmed them, just as she had done Drew’s long-sleeved keeper jersey, and Ashlyn was very pleased with the final result. Kyle had given her a fresh haircut Saturday morning, holding his breath as he used scissors to try and get the shaved, fade that his sister-in-law wanted. He used the electric razor everywhere else, but painstakingly clipped and snipped the hair where her scar was healing above her right ear. The bottom and back of her hair was her natural, light brown color and the top, longer part she kept blonde. It looked good and Kyle wasn’t shy about telling her. All three Krieger women were beautifully dressed for church and ready to hit the road.

The Harris clan had come up for the long weekend, arriving en masse Friday evening. It was great to see everyone and it felt wonderful considering they had all just been together at Kyle’s wedding two months earlier. The Harris men were unsurprisingly dramatic when they saw Ashlyn. They each wrapped her up in huge bear hugs until she practically had to beg them to let her breathe.

“Damn Bash” Chris mumbled as he released her. “Don’t ever scare me like that again.”

“Deal” she smiled softly at him, touched by how upset he was. “Thank you so much for making the trip again. I know it’s not easy and it means a lot to us.”

“Wouldn’t miss it” he met her smile and squeezed her arm.

Deb and Mike Christopher came up and stayed at the beachfront hotel everyone had used for Ali and Ashlyn’s wedding. And Kyle and Nathan stayed with the Kimballs again. The whole crew was together and the church was packed that Sunday morning. The two proud mothers sat in the front row and beamed at their little girl. It was almost time for her nap but so far, so good. She squirmed a little bit in Dom’s arms and cried when Reverend Janet poured the water onto her head. Sydney, 8 months pregnant, huge, and glowing, leaned over and stroked the bottom of Josie’s cheek the way she liked and soothed her before she started crying full throttle. Ali glanced down the row and smiled at Drew who was sitting on Chris’ lap and holding Whitney’s hand in the seat next to him. Ashlyn sat there, clutching her wife’s hand and trying to just be present in the moment. She was overcome with so many emotions as she thought about the beautiful christening gown that Gram had made with her own two hands. They hadn’t waited this time. Ashlyn wanted Josie to wear the family christening gown and they had scheduled accordingly. The real irony of their situation was that Josie was so small that she probably would still have fit into it even if they had waited until she was seven months old. The keeper thought about how close they had come to losing their daughter and she almost fell apart right there in church. Ali felt her keeper tense up and reached over with her free
hand and ran it slowly up and down her arm. It took a minute, but the brunette’s touch comforted her and helped her like nothing else had ever been able to. Ashlyn fought off the ghosts and her fears and was able to watch her baby girl get baptized. She admired the ship’s bell that Reverend Janet was using as the baptismal font again. The keeper was happy she had started that task at the beginning of August, between the two dramas of their summer. ‘Josephine Marie Krieger – 6/19/2021’ had been recently engraved in one long line, right above Drew’s name. When her leg had healed she would go back to Naomi and get Josie’s name tattooed onto the ‘Mary Sarah’ on the back of her right thigh to bring it up to date as well.

Everybody came back to the big old house for lunch and they all spent the rest of the afternoon and evening together. A few minutes after they arrived home after church, Ali pulled her wife into the pantry with her and gave her a big hug, sliding the pocket door closed for some privacy.

“Are you ok sweetheart?” she kissed her cheek and leaned back to look at Ashlyn’s face. “If you need to go upstairs and find some quiet you just go ahead and do it, ok? Nobody cares…”

“Nice peptalk honey” the keeper giggled.

“You know what I mean” the brunette chuckled and gave her wife a soft, slow kiss.

Ashlyn rested her forehead against her wife’s and closed her eyes for a second.

“I started thinking about Gram’s christening gown and then I thought about Josie and then I thought about almost losing her and all my emotions just took off and I started to feel overwhelmed” she paused and swallowed. “I get really emotional about Gram when we baptize our kids I guess” she smiled shyly.

“That’s ok. I’ve felt really close to her both times too” the brunette admitted with a shrug. “And when I think about what happened to Josie and me and then what happened to you and Drew, I just feel blessed and lucky.” She paused and tried to find a way to explain her feelings to the blonde. “I think when some time has passed by and we’re not so close to it, I think all we’ll remember is how incredibly lucky we’ve been this year. You know?”

“I sure hope you’re right.”

“Come on” Ali slid the pocket door of the pantry back open. “Let’s go have some fun with our families and friends.”

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Tammye had decided to just stay in the big old house for the week between the end of September, when she had originally planned to leave, and Columbus Day weekend. She missed Carol like crazy and was pleasantly surprised when the thoughtful southerner came into the mudroom behind Ali the weekend before the christening.

“Look what I found at the grocery store” the brunette grinned as she put down Carol’s suitcase and watched the two women embrace.

“Wait” Tammye pulled back a little and looked at her daughter-in-law curiously. “So did you really go to the grocery store or do I need to go do that?” she asked with a chuckle.

“I wasn’t going to make her wait to get here but she insisted on helping me get it done faster” Ali explained over her shoulder as she walked back to the truck to start bringing in the grocery bags. “Thanks again Carol.”
It had been a really nice week. Carol was always good to have around and Tammye just blossomed under her attention. It was like the happiness level for the entire house went up two notches just because Carol was there. The first day she arrived, Saturday, they all settled in together in the living room to watch the two NWSL playoff games. Ashlyn couldn’t not watch. She had to. The first game, at 4pm, was #3 ranked Portland playing at #2 ranked Chicago and the blonde said a prayer of thanks that she had never had to play such a big game against her girlfriend’s team. She knew both Tobin and Christen were ultimate professionals and were used to the situation, but she was glad she had never been put in that position. The second game, at 7pm, was #4 ranked Orlando playing at #1 ranked, and Supporters Shield winning, Los Angeles.

“I want Christen Press to get her championship” the keeper stated with a nod of her head as they watched the pregame handshakes. “She’s an amazing player and she deserves it more than anybody else I can think of. And Tobin’s already won it before.”

“Well this is the year for her to do it” Ali chuckled. “Lord knows she’s never been able to beat you.”

“Strike while the iron’s hot” Tammye added. “I like it. I’m officially cheering for the Red Stars, just don’t tell Tobin. Yayyy Red Stars!!” she waved Josie’s arms up above her head as she held her on her lap.

When the dust had settled that evening, Chicago was headed to Minnesota for Championship Week where they would face Orlando for the trophy. Ashlyn texted Christen Press a quick, congratulatory message and then posted congratulations to both winning teams on all of her social media. As upset as she was to have missed the playoffs, the keeper was surprised by how genuinely happy she was for Christen Press.

The next night Ali and Tammye were cleaning up the kitchen after dinner while Carol helped Ashlyn give Drew his bath. It was becoming increasingly difficult to keep his cast dry and they found their odds went up significantly with two people. If you didn’t pay close enough attention the toddler would pull the plastic bag and elastic right off. There had been too many close calls.

“Listen, Ali” Tammye started nervously as she finished washing the frying pan and turned to look at her daughter-in-law who had just put several things into the recycling bin near the sink. “I’ve been trying to say this to you since I got here and I just...haven’t.”

Ali froze as the lid to the recycling bin closed. She didn’t turn towards Tammye. She didn’t even breathe for a minute. What the fuck was this about and why was her mother-in-law so nervous?

“Oh, it’s times like this where I really really wish I could have a drink” she chuckled and looked at the floor, hoping Ali would turn around.

The brunette slowly spun on her heel and was so distracted by how nervous Tammye was that she almost offered the woman some wine!

“What’s going on Tammye?” Ali’s words were quiet and slow as she looked cautiously at her mother-in-law’s pink face.

“It’s nothing” she replied quickly and started to turn away. “Never mind...”

“No no” Ali shook her head and gently grabbed Tammye’s arm. “You can’t do that. My heart’s already racing, you have to tell me now.”

Tammye exhaled loudly and closed her eyes as her face got even redder.

“This is so silly...I just...we just wanted to thank you, and Ashlyn, for sending us the...information.”
Ali frowned as her mind tried to figure out what she was talking about.

“You know, at the end of August...”

“Oh!” Ali’s eyebrows went up to her hairline and she felt her own cheeks beginning to blush. “Right. Umm, you’re welcome” she smiled awkwardly but couldn’t meet Tammye’s eyes. “I hope some of it was...helpful.”

“It was” the older woman swallowed hard. “It was really kind of you...”

There were so many unasked questions in the air that Ali didn’t really know what to say next. She and Ashlyn had talked about, and even written in the note they included with the lists of helpful lesbian books and movies, taking her mom and Carol to Provincetown the next time they visited. Well, here they were, visiting. Fuck. It wasn’t the best time to go to Provincetown because it was ‘after the season’ but it wasn’t the worst either. It was the first week of October and the weather was still beautiful. There wouldn’t be nearly the amount of people there that would be between Memorial Day and Labor Day but maybe that was a good thing? Shit. Nobody’s said anything for a long time. Say something!

“We should take you guys to Provincetown this week.” Ali heard how cheerful her voice sounded and cringed internally. Who gets that excited about taking their wife’s mother and her girlfriend to experience lesbian culture?! “If you want” she shrugged, wishing she was anywhere else at that moment.

“Oh, well...” Tammye stammered, clearly just as uncomfortable as her daughter-in-law. “Are you sure you wouldn’t mind? I mean, I know this is awkward and I don’t want to make it worse” she rolled her eyes and chuckled. “Can it get worse?” Ali quipped and then turned beet red when she realized she had said those words out loud.

Tammye laughed. It was soft at first but, when Ali joined her, it turned into a loud, belly laugh that left them both breathless after a couple of minutes.

“Why don’t you check with Ashlyn” Tammye chuckled.

“Yeah, I will. Just...it’s probably best if we leave her out of most of it. She’s on board, I promise, she just...”

“Doesn’t want to think about her mother having sex” Tammye nodded. “I get it. Trust me.”

It took a couple of days for Ali to figure out a way for somebody to watch both of the kids for a full, long day out. Vicki came over for the day to take care of Josie and Whitney picked Drew up from daycare in the afternoon and went back to the big old house to help out for the rest of the day and spend the night. Ali pulled her truck over on Commercial Street in the middle of the main strip of Provincetown so her passengers could get out. It was just after 11am and it had been a long, three-hour drive because nobody wanted to talk about the elephant in the truck. Both couples knew what the plan was. But Ashlyn was just not going to talk about it. Not yet anyway. Ashlyn and Ali were going to show Tammye and Carol Provincetown and explore some of the shops with them and then let them wander around on their own. They would eat an early dinner and then hit the lesbian club for a couple of hours before driving back home. The only difficult part of the day was Ashlyn and not just because of her level of discomfort. She was still on crutches so she wasn’t going to be doing too much walking. It was probably best for everybody, honestly. She could sit and relax while the others explored.
The very first thing Tammye did was reach for Carol’s hand as they walked along the sidewalk looking for the restaurant Carol wanted to try for lunch. When Ali saw that, she couldn’t help but flash back to the couple of visits she and Emily had made to the town in her past. It was the only place Emily had ever let Ali hold her hand in public. The sense of freedom young Ali had felt spurred the brunette on in their current endeavor. Yes, it was awkward as hell. But Ali knew how Tammye felt when she took Carol’s hand and walked down the street with the woman she loved.

“It’s usually four times this busy down here, if you come in the summertime” Ali explained as Carol paid the lunch check and they started to walk back out onto the street. “And it’s some of the best people-watching you’re ever going to find” she chuckled.

She had already talked about her favorite bookstore and coffee shop and listed off some of the more popular shops along the main strip. Ali couldn’t get over how much more relaxed the two women looked.

“They look ten years younger” she whispered excitedly to her wife as they strolled along slowly behind the older couple. “Tell me you can’t see that” she challenged.

“Yeah, they look really happy. I’m not blind. I’m just uncomfortable” the keeper agreed with a sigh. “But I’m here and I’m trying. I really am.”

“I think I want to take them into the toy shop” Ali made an ‘eek’ face and waited for the blonde’s response.

“Ugh, God Al” Ashlyn turned pink and groaned. “I don’t think I can do that. I just...that’s too much for me” she shook her head.

“No, I know” Ali rubbed her wife’s arm and missed holding her hand. Stupid crutches. “I didn’t mean you too. That’s definitely too much. I’m not even sure I can do it, to be honest” she giggled. “I think I’d be a lot better at this if I had a drink” she laughed.

“You’re doing a great job honey” Ashlyn stopped and sat down on a bench that looked out over the ocean. She patted the bench, asking her wife to join her. “Thank you for trying to help them. I know it’s not much easier for you and I really appreciate how hard you’re trying.”

The brunette wrapped her arms around Ashlyn and nuzzled her face into her neck from her seat beside her. The keeper put her arm around her waist and pulled her in close. They sat together like that for several minutes, just enjoying the beautiful day and the intimacy of the moment.

“I wonder if that nice lady who helped us the first time you brought me there still works there?” Ali thought out loud.

“Works where?” Ashlyn furrowed her brow, confused.

“The toy shop.”

“Oh, yeah” Ashlyn considered it for a moment. “She was pretty cool. I hope she is still there. And, you know” she pulled back and kissed Ali’s forehead, “we can go get a drink anytime you want. We’re going to be here for a while and you’re not pregnant or nursing” Ashlyn chuckled. “We could get completely shifftaced if we wanted to and my mom could drive our asses home.”

Tammye and Carol met them a couple of hours later in the center of the main strip area, where there were several benches under two big trees. They had strolled and explored and made a couple of purchases. Carol bought a beautiful painting from one of the art galleries at the far end of the strip. It would be shipped directly to the beach house in Florida. And Tammye had a bag with some books in
it that she wasn’t eager to show them. Ali and Ashlyn had visited a bar overlooking the water and had a couple of drinks each and were feeling pretty good. Just nicely buzzed.

“Ok ladies” the brunette stood up with a spark in her eye. “Leave your stuff with Grandma here because I want to show you a place that might terrify you at first but, I promise, you’ll be ok.”

Carol and Tammye looked at each other while Ashlyn groaned, knowing where her wife was taking them. Tammye was definitely more nervous than Carol was and Ali made note of it. Carol was going to be the one to talk to and the brunette wished she would have a drink or two of her own so they could get through it. Maybe that’s what she would do. Take Carol away and have a drink with her and just see what happened, see what the new lesbian asked her.

“So, I won’t lie” Ali swallowed hard as she started walking Tammye and Carol towards the sex toy store that was below street level, right in the middle of the strip. “When I first went into this shop I thought I was going to die. If I hadn’t been with someone I totally trusted and felt safe with, well, I wouldn’t have bought anything and I probably would never have gone back. I’ve been to a few shops like this over the years and this is still the best one.”

She walked them down the steps and through the door and heard Carol gasp as her eyes adjusted faster than her girlfriend’s. It took Tammye a full minute before she sucked in her own breath of recognition. Ali was disappointed that the sales clerk who had been so kind to her wasn’t the person sitting behind the register by the door. There was only one other person in the store – a woman older than Ali but younger than Carol and Tammye, and she was looking at the DVD collection on the far wall.

“So don’t freak out” Ali spoke softly and avoided making eye contact. She was so glad that the alcohol in her system was giving her the guts to do this. “There’s all kinds of stuff here and a lot of it is just for shock value, if you ask me. But different strokes for different folks and all that. The point is, there is lots of stuff that’s not so scary too. So just give yourself a minute and try not to panic” she giggled as they moved along the main aisle towards the back where the room with the curtain was.

As they got closer, an older woman with glasses came out of the employee-only door near the curtained room and they all startled each other.

“I’m so sorry” the woman said and smiled. “I didn’t know you were there, you’re as quiet as church mice” she laughed easily.

“Oh my God” Ali’s eyes went wide. “It’s you! I was hoping you still worked here” she grinned at the woman and had to fight the urge to hug her.

“Work here?” she laughed again. “Honey, I’m the owner. I’m always here.”

Ali took a minute and explained, briefly, what was going on. She identified Tammye and Carol as her friends and told the owner that they were newer at things.

“I brought them here because you were so sweet to me on my first visit and I couldn’t think of a better place for them to start exploring” Ali shared.

Tammye still looked like she wanted to crawl into a hole but Carol was intrigued by how calm and relaxed the owner was. Ali released her charges into the owner’s custody and told them to take their time and meet them outside when they were ready. Honestly, Ali wanted to spend some time in there for herself but she was afraid of making them uncomfortable so she just went out the door and up the stairs without looking back. She filled her wife in and the two sat together and reminisced about some of their favorite sex toys as they waited.
“Lesbian erotica” Ashlyn said quietly after their sex toy conversation had fizzled out.

She was lying on the bench with her head in Ali’s lap and her right leg up on the arm of the bench. Ali caressed her face and bent down to kiss it every few minutes as well.

“Excuse me?” Ali quirked an eyebrow at the blonde who just giggled.

“My mom’s bag from the bookstore” she nodded towards the bag at Ali’s feet. “She got a couple of the books we recommended and then, like, four different collections of lesbian erotica.”

They both giggled for a minute and the brunette fought the urge to play with Ashlyn’s breasts. Damn, she would have to start working on her alcohol tolerance again. She wasn’t used to being a lightweight.

“Well some of it’s really hot” she purred as she bent over and brought their lips together.

“You’ve read that stuff before?”

“Not a lot, and not in a long time” Ali answered thoughtfully, “but yeah, definitely. Living with Emily was like one, long blue-balls torture-fest so I got a little creative.”

“My poor baby” Ashlyn made a sincere sad face and cupped Ali’s cheek with her hand. “You’re so awesome that I forget sometimes what an awful experience that was for you.” They kissed again and grinned at each other like idiots.

“Why don’t you read it anymore?”

Ali laughed out loud, her short, shout of a laugh and her face broke into the nose-crinkling grin that Ashlyn loved more than almost anything else in the world.

“Um, maybe because I don’t need imaginary romance that’s all in my head, silly.” She let her hand wander down to her wife’s taut stomach and then to her hips. “I’ve got real romance and true love in my bed with me every night now. It doesn’t get any better than that.”

Tammye and Carol were in the toy store for over an hour and Ali was about to go in and rescue them when she saw the tops of their heads coming up the stairs. She was very pleased to see a discreet brown bag in Carol’s hand. They all walked quietly to the restaurant they had chosen for dinner and had a delicious meal together. It had taken them a good deal of time that day to find something to talk about besides sex or their grandchildren. Ali had asked some good questions about what kind of gay and lesbian scene they had found down in the Melbourne Beach, Florida area and both Carol and Tammye had started talking more. Ashlyn beat Carol to the check for dinner and both Tammye and Ali were proud of her for doing so. She really was trying to be as supportive as possible.

It was barely 7pm when they went into the lesbian club, sat at the bar and ordered a round of drinks. There were only a handful of patrons inside and some of them looked like they’d been there all afternoon long.

“Shit” Ali whispered to her keeper as they waited for their drinks. “We could have just come right here and started drinking at 11am. We’d probably be farther along” she giggled.

The brunette ordered a drink hoping Carol would too and she was ecstatic when she did. Ali didn’t need any more alcohol so she slowly sipped the one drink for a long time. Ashlyn decided to participate and it was kind of cute listening to her explain how things worked in a club like that. She described how packed it could get and how hot and how drunk and crazy some women got.

“It’s the whole ‘freedom’ thing, you know?”
Both Carol and Tammye looked back at her like they didn’t know.

“A gay or lesbian club is a safe space. You can hold hands here and, most importantly, you can dance with your girl here and not get stared at or cat-called or harassed. It’s freedom to be who you are as soon as you walk through those doors. And that freedom goes to some people’s heads and makes them drink too much or talk too much or who knows what” she smiled shyly at her mother and Carol who were sitting close together. “We should dance.”

The keeper crutched to the edge of the dance floor and leaned one crutch against the wall. She used the other crutch to get out onto the floor a few feet and smirked when her wife met her there. Ashlyn held Ali’s hand up high and the brunette twirled twice for her. They kissed and wrapped their arms around each other as they moved to the music. The only move gimpy Ashlyn had was the high school boy’s sway from side to side, but it was better than nothing and Ali would take it. After a few more minutes Carol and Tammye joined them on the dance floor but kept a safe distance. Ashlyn realized, sadly, that she had never seen them dance before. Not ever. Not even just in the kitchen or something like that. She started to understand more of why Ali wanted so much to help them. They were both so uncomfortable with being lesbians and it was sad as fuck. The keeper remembered some of the things that Ali had said about it over the past couple of months and it all started to make more sense. Tammye and Carol were both uncomfortable in their own skin but they seemed to be making strides towards rectifying that condition. It would take time. They each had a lifetime of preconceived notions about what it meant to be a lesbian and they would have to figure out ways to let all that fall by the wayside so they could learn how to love themselves. It was obvious that they loved each other. What they were finding so difficult was making peace with who they really were whether it was a lesbian or a bisexual person or however they chose to identify.

After an hour Tammye and Ashlyn went outside and sat on another bench. Tammye walked down to the only coffee shop that was still open and brought back two coffees. They didn’t talk too much but the silence was a comfortable and easy one. They were both relieved to leave the awkwardness behind, if only for a little while. Meanwhile, back in the club, Ali had struck up a conversation with the bartender who was, again, older than Ali but younger than Carol. She waited for Carol to go to the restroom and then she confessed to the bartender what she was trying to do. The barkeep laughed out loud and shook her head slowly.

“God bless you honey” she chuckled. The brunette managed to get both the bartender and the only waitress who was still on duty to join their conversation. It made it infinitely easier and Carol relaxed more too. Ali rifled through Tammye’s bag of books and pulled out the sex guide for lesbians that included illustrations. The brunette sucked in a breath and told herself not to stop now. She asked her two new friends to play a game with her and they looked at each other skeptically as Ali explained the simple game.

“We’ll flip to a random page and put our finger down without looking. We all have to say whether or not we’ve done whatever the illustration shows. It’ll be easy” she assured them as she opened the big, paperback book that was roughly 8 x 11”.

Two other women who had come to the bar to order drinks watched with interest as Ali lifted her eyes up and to the side so she couldn’t see what page she was turning to. She put her hand on a page and let the book fall open under her finger before looking down at the black and white illustration. She wanted to die when she saw the picture closest to her finger.

“Oh fuck no” she shook her head. “I’m not drunk enough to start off with fisting!”

She quickly repeated her actions and found a new page while the other four women laughed loudly. Carol chuckled but she didn’t really understand what had happened. The waitress patted Ali on the
“I’m with you honey” she chuckled. “It’s too early for that!”

As awkward as it was, the hitch on the very first illustration seemed to relax everybody. The two women who had come for a drink stayed to watch and eventually joined in the fun. Ali’s first official illustration showed one woman sitting on her partner’s face, facing forward. She blushed and said yes and took a swig of her drink while the bartender, the waitress and one of the two newcomers all said yes. When they all looked at the other newbie she shrugged.

“I like it the other way, facing backwards. The view’s better.”

Nobody made Carol participate, but she paid very close attention and even asked a few simple questions here and there. It didn’t hurt that she kept buying drinks for the group either. She was happy to do it. This was the kind of education no amount of money could pay for and she was more than grateful to all of them for catering to her like that. After the first hour slipped by in what felt like ten minutes, Tammye and Ashlyn came back into the club. They watched carefully from the end of the bar, unsure if they were intruding or not. Finally Tammye came over and stood next to Carol with her arm wrapped around her shoulders and started to realize what was going on. She blushed furiously but sipped on her club soda and stood her ground. It felt so much safer with Carol close by. Ashlyn kept her distance. She bought a round and watched and listened until she couldn’t stand the eyefucking that was coming from her wife across the bar anymore. After a few earlier bathroom trips the group had re-positioned to the corner of the bar so they could put the book in the corner and see it better. Ali wasn’t right next to Carol anymore so the keeper felt comfortable crutching over and sitting on a barstool next to her wife, who stood on the edge of the group. She felt the brunette pat her thigh as they stayed close together and Ashlyn finally pulled her wife in between her legs and held her there with her hands on Ali’s hips.

It was the waitress’ turn and she put her finger down on a picture of a dildo, among several different dildos on the page. She rolled her eyes and giggled.

“Yes, but really, has anyone not? I mean except for the fresh converts” she nodded at Carol and Tammye as everybody laughed.

The whole rest of the group was a yes, and Ashlyn even said yes, hoping nobody would notice that she had started to play.

“What are all these things for?” Carol asked, fearlessly, as she pointed to a dildo with a bunch of knobs sticking out all over it. The small amount of alcohol in her system was doing its job nicely.

“Oooh, the magic buttons!” one woman grinned excitedly. “I love those fucking things. They just feel good. I never thought it could feel that different” she continued and quirked her eyebrow at Carol. “Boy was I wrong” she laughed and most of them joined her.

“I don’t like ‘em” the bartender weighed in. “If you get the size right you don’t need anything extra.”

Ali turned her head sideways, very slowly, and whispered to her wife.

“Don’t you DARE say a word” she warned with a stern look and a squeeze of her keeper’s thigh.

Ashlyn just gave her a sweet kiss and smiled as the other woman started to talk about how difficult it could be to get the right size dildo.

“It’s worth the effort though when you do finally get the perfect fit” the woman smiled dreamily and then giggled.
When it was finally time to go, Ali still had to drive them three hours to get home that night so she called it at 10pm, the strangers who had been so kind and generous and funny with their time and experiences all gave Tammye and Carol a piece of advice.

“Just be open-minded. If you trust each other you’ll be fine and have a lot of fun too.”

“Talk about it before you get into the middle of it. Trust me, it makes it so much better” the waitress said with a wink.

“Lube is your friend. Find one that you love and keep trying different flavors if you haven’t found one that you love yet.”

“Try not to make each other feel bad about anything” the bartender leaned across the bar and handed the book back to Carol. “No kink-shaming. You can always say no, but don’t be a dick about it.”

The drive home was long and difficult and Ali was thankful she had switched to just coke for the last several rounds. She had sobered up and had plenty of caffeine in her system to help her stay awake. Tammye and Carol were both asleep in the backseat, adorably cuddled up together. Ashlyn was asleep too and Ali was alone with her thoughts after the podcast she had been listening to had come to an end. She thought back to how embarrassing it had been, several times during the afternoon and evening, trying to talk to Tammye and Carol about sex things. She had never wished for Kyle or Sydney more in her life. If either one of them had been there with them today it would have been so much easier and tons more fun. Ali knew she was just never going to be that person who could say things without caring what other people thought. It was a constant, lifelong struggle for her but she knew she had gotten better about it as she grew up. And now that she had Ashlyn and didn’t have to worry about being alone or potentially scaring off her future soulmate by saying the wrong thing, she had grown even more confident with her words. But she was just not ever going to be at Kyle or Sydney’s level. And she was ok with that. As long as she was comfortable with herself and as long as Ashlyn loved her, nothing else mattered.

“You’re a good person, you know” the keeper’s soft voice startled Ali and made her heart race.

“Jesus” she gripped the wheel tightly and glanced at the blonde in the passenger seat next to her. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“Sorry” Ashlyn gave her a sleepy smile, her voice still low so she didn’t wake up the sleepers in the backseat. “I wish I could drive for you baby. Are you doing ok?”

“Yeah, I’m ok. We’re almost there.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t more helpful today” Ashlyn scooted as close to the center console as she could and put her hand on Ali’s thigh, squeezing it softly. “I really tried, but...”

“Ash, it’s ok. You did great” the brunette put her hand on top of hers on her thigh and held it there. “I wouldn’t have done any better if it had been my mom. Hell, I don’t even think I could have made the trip” she chuckled quietly, careful not to wake up their passengers. “So stop apologizing, ok?”

“Ok” the keeper’s voice was sleepy and cute and she intertwined her fingers with Ali’s and watched her beautiful brunette as she drove them through the dark. “You’re a really good person and I love you. That’s all.” She shrugged her shoulders. “In case I haven’t told you lately.”

“Thank you honey.”

“And I’ve been thinking a lot about this and it’s time to make a change” she still sounded small and soft and sleepy. “We have our new little princess so you can’t be the princess anymore” she shook
her head and moved her thumb across the back of Ali’s hand as she spoke. “You’re my queen now and forever more. It has been decided.”

“Alright babe” Ali chuckled. “Why don’t you go back to sleep now. We’ll be home soon.”

“As you wish, my queen.”
Marcy Hopkins strode down the carpeted hallway, tastefully decorated with a nice blend of sports memorabilia and slightly edgy modern art pieces, and knocked on her boss’ open door.

“Ali, do you have a minute?” she asked as she entered the room once she saw the brunette sitting at her desk.

Marcy had learned the hard way that if Ali wasn’t sitting at her desk and facing her desk that she might be pumping breastmilk. The executive assistant knew that her boss wasn’t breastfeeding her daughter but the muscle memory from the first baby still kicked in and made her pause, just for a second, before entering the office even if the door was open.

“Hey Marce, sure” Ali slid her keyboard tray under the surface of her desk and smiled at the woman as she sat in one of the chairs in front of the desk. “What’s up?” she frowned with worry when she noticed that Marcy had closed the door behind her.

“I just met with Kamala Pierce and we’ve got a problem” she began, opening her leather portfolio and reading over the notes she had just taken.

“I just met with her now, as in here in the building?” Ali clarified.

“Yes, I asked her to wait for a few minutes in case you wanted to talk with her.”

“That can’t be good” Ali sighed. “What happened?”

“Do you know who Kamala is?” Marcy asked, meaning no disrespect and trusting her 3-1/2 year relationship with Ali would allow the honest communication.

“I know she’s local” Ali squinted as she worked her brain for more details. “Just finished her rookie season in the WNBA. Huge talent on a terrible team. Didn’t make the playoffs. Oh” she raised her eyebrows as one last memory came clear. “Her mother is the actual devil.”

Marcy laughed and nodded.

“Impressive” she teased. “Do you study our client files while you’re home on maternity leave too?”

“Nah” Ali smiled. “I like this girl a lot. She had all of the talent and none of the attitude. I remember her well. Christian reps her, right?”

“Yes” Marcy exhaled. “And that’s the problem.”

“Alright” Ali leaned forward and picked up her pen in case she wanted to take some notes of her own. “Let’s hear it.”

Normally, a complaint against one of the agents would get brought to the senior agent and their new Human Resources manager and the two of them would handle it as best they could. If they disagreed on how to handle it or if what they tried didn’t work, then they would bring it to one of the partners, usually Ali or sometimes Jared. But these high-level problems were what Ali handled far more often than not. This week was Championship week in the NWSL and Jen Tucker, the senior agent in the company, was in Minnesota with Paige Dandreo working with all of Knight-Harris’ soccer clients. Marcy knew this was going to end up in Ali’s lap anyway so she just side-stepped the Human Resources Manager to save some time.
“Kamala’s making some serious allegations about Christian. Sexual harassment being the most serious, but she’s also saying he’s misrepresenting her and not working in her best interest.”

“Holy shit” Ali’s face was pale. “Is it true?”

Marcy’s silence told her everything she needed to know.

“I don’t know anything for a fact but...I’ve heard rumors” she finally admitted.

Ali picked up the phone on her desk and spoke into it.

“Wendy will you please go into conference room...” she paused and looked expectantly at Marcy.

“Two, conference room two” the executive assistant answered quickly.

“...Conference room two” Ali continued into the phone, “and ask Ms. Pierce if she can wait for me for a few more minutes, please? Tell her I’d really like to talk with her and I’m just finishing something up. Thank you.”

She ended the call and pushed another button.

“Patrick, will you please ask Jared and Sutapa to come to my office right away? It’s urgent.”

Ali spent the next thirty minutes getting the Readers Digest version of the allegations against one of her own agents. Jared and Sutapa, the HR manager, had hustled right down to Ali’s office and listened along as Marcy recounted her meeting with Kamala Pierce.

“Unfuckingbelievable” Ali said through gritted teeth at the end of the half hour. “I never liked that guy” she shook her head. “I was out-voted by the other partners when we were deciding whether or not to hire him” she was careful not to look at Jared who had regret written all over his face at the moment. “Marcy, call Sela and get her working with Kamala right away. Then meet me downstairs and we’ll talk to her. I don’t want to make her wait any longer. Five minutes, ok?”

“Got it” Marcy stood up and moved to the other side of the office before dialing their other WNBA specialist agent.

“I’m going to talk to Kamala and see if she’ll let us handle this internally. If she insists on filing official charges I won’t try and stop her. He deserves whatever he’s got coming to him” Ali continued.

“But we’ll take the hit too” Jared added glumly.

“Yes, we will. And that pisses me off more than you can imagine” Ali’s eyes blazed with anger as she spoke in a clear and mostly calm voice. “But I don’t want to run from it. I want to be open and honest about it and move fast so nobody can accuse us of dragging our feet or trying to cover anything up. We’ll make an example out of him and prove to all of our clients that we take care of our own. Clients too, not just agents.”

“I’ll start the paperwork on his dismissal” Sutapa offered, still scribbling down notes from the meeting. “But, just to be clear, it’s going to be a case of ‘he said – she said’ and those usually don’t go well for the ‘she’.”

“Well we’re going to back the ‘she’ this time, even though Christian is probably thinking otherwise” Ali stood up, put her suit jacket on, and smoothed out the wrinkles in her skirt. “I’ll make it clear to him how this will go down. If he wants to make a big splash about it that’ll be his decision. Make
sure you call his previous employers and dig deeper about this. I’ll bet this is why he really left that other firm and came so highly recommended. They were probably just happy to get rid of him and were doing damage control of their own.”

“I’ll make those calls” Jared looked at Sutapa but she just nodded at him. “I’m pissed off now.”

“Work with legal and make sure we’ve got everything in order” the brunette instructed as she walked towards the door of her office. “Let’s all meet again this afternoon for updates and then we’ll decide on the next step. Ok?” She paused at the doorway and waited until both Jared and Sutapa answered her affirmatively and got up to go back to their own offices. Ali looked at Marcy who was just getting off the phone. “Sela on board?”

“Yeah, you’re going to want to talk to her before you do anything official. She’s got more information, and maybe evidence” Marcy shook her head as she followed her boss down the hall.

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“I can’t believe what a prick that guy is” Ashlyn took the beer Whitney had just handed her.

“Language” Ali reminded in a sing song voice from her spot on the living room floor.

It was just after 4pm and Whitney had come up to the big old house to watch the NWSL Championship game with her bestie. They were both comfortably situated on the couch and had been talking about the big drama at Knight-Harris that week. Ali was lying on her stomach on the floor trying to get Josie to do one of her ten-minute chunks of tummy time. The brunette had had a flash of brilliance the other day and had Drew lie down next to her at the same time. The two of them, together, encouraged Josie to lift her head up and look at them in front of her. This was the third day in a row that it was working. It was only a matter of time before Drew lost interest, but, for now, it was awesome. Josie lifted her head and shakily moved her neck so she could see her brother’s face, instantly smiling as soon as she did.

“What a good girl!” Ali praised her. “And what a good big brother” she hugged her son and kissed him on the cheek.

“So you had no idea what he was really like before you hired him?” Whitney asked Ashlyn as the Red Stars kicked off and took possession of the ball first.

“Ugh, don’t get her started” Ashlyn rolled her eyes at her wife who wasn’t even paying attention to their conversation anymore. “She’s the only one of us who voted not to hire him two years ago. She’s not officially gloating yet, but I know she wants to.”

“But he must have looked good on paper for the rest of you to vote yes, right?”

“Sure. He looked awesome on paper. And in person” the keeper answered. “Almost too good to be true. We wanted to increase our presence in the WNBA and he was one of two agents we hired at the same time. He didn’t have as much experience as the other agent we hired, but he had some WNBA and NBA clients coming with him and a great resume and excellent recommendations. We would have been dumb not to hire him.”

“Except he was too good to be true” Whitney smirked.

There was a fine line between being cocky and confident in your abilities and being an arrogant asshole and the two best friends had shared a mutual dislike for the latter group of people for as long as they had known each other. They had come across plenty of them at UNC and could spot them a mile away. The recruits who came to visit were used to being the very best player in their high
school and sometimes even their whole state, wherever it was. They thought they were God’s greatest gift and that their shit didn’t stink. Most of them never made it onto the team and the ones that did had a major attitude adjustment in store for them if they wanted to be Tarheels. Whitney was surprised that Ashlyn hadn’t been able to sniff this agent guy out during the interview process.

“I know” Ashlyn shook her head. “I can’t believe I missed it.”

“Whit, are you done with law school yet?” Ali asked as she got off the floor and handed Josie to her. “I need you to get your degree and come work with us. I need somebody I can trust.”

“What’s the matter with the lawyers you have now?”

“I want somebody in-house or at least somebody who’ll make us their priority.” She sighed and stood next to the law student for a minute, talking and watching the game. “The lawyer my dad referred us to is awesome and I love him but his specialty is the contract side of things. He can’t really help us much with this situation. And the law firm he referred us to for this harassment thing couldn’t care less” she sighed heavily. “It’s so frustrating.”

“Two years from now we can talk about it” Whitney smiled up at the brunette. “And I can’t imagine a firm not giving a damn about a case like this. This is the type of thing that gets me excited about the law.”

“See” Ali whined as she walked through the mudroom to get a bottle for Josie. “We need you!” she yelled over her shoulder.”

“I think Orlando learned a lot playing this game against us last year” Ashlyn commented a few minutes later. “Chicago hasn’t been here before and it’s weird to think about them being the less experienced team right now.”

“Christen will figure something out and make it look effortless while she’s doing it” Whitney joked as she fed Josie the bottle Ali had just handed her. “What a game though, huh? We get to watch two of the best strikers in the world go at each other.”

“Not to be an arrogant a-hole” Ashlyn carefully avoided swearing and then smirked, “but Naeher didn’t stop Marta’s shot. I’m just saying.”

“Yeah well, Marta also scored on you at the end of the game too, hot shot” Whitney gave the keeper a pointed look.

“Oh come on” Ashlyn made a dramatic show of flopping back against the couch. “That was Megan’s fault and you know it. I told her to stick with Marta no matter what!”

“I know you did” the law student laughed. “I was there, remember? I’m just trying to keep an arrogant a-hole down here on earth with the rest of us, that’s all.”

“Thank you Whitney” Ali added as she came into the room with pizza and salad and paper plates and napkins. “Lord knows it takes the both of us” she winked. “All Star, do you think you can feed your son while we watch the game?”

“Yes, but he needs his hands washed first, please” she smiled sweetly at the brunette who had just sat down to eat.

Ali gave her a look and Ashlyn wiggled her casted leg in the air and pointed at it sadly. The brunette sighed and stood up.
“Come on sweet boy, let’s get your hands washed so you can eat your dinner.”

“Ok mommy” he replied and hugged Ali’s legs tightly instead of running past her to the hall bathroom like he usually did.

The sweet gesture melted the brunette’s heart and made her forget about her bratty wife’s antics. By the time Ali sat back down to eat, Josie was fussing and ready for another of her short naps. Whitney had fed her and burped her and offered to take her up and put her down but the brunette smiled and turned down the offer.

“Thanks Whit, but I’ve got her. You eat before your pizza gets cold” Ali carried her baby girl up the front stairs.

She chuckled to herself as she remembered hearing so many stories from friends and family with small children about how they hadn’t sat down for a hot meal in x amount of years. The brunette had always thought that sounded so overdramatic. But she was starting to understand how true it really was. Later that night, after they watched Christen Press and the Red Stars win their first NWSL Championship, and after they had spent much of the rest of the evening talking with Whitney about the legal issues at K-H and some of the interesting cases she was studying at school, Ali helped her wife prop up her right leg with pillows for the night and then crawled into bed beside her.

“I really want Whitney to come work with us when she’s got her degree” the brunette’s face was very serious. “Do you think she would ever consider it?”

“Um, yeah, I don’t see why not” Ashlyn shrugged.

“Well don’t sound too excited about it or anything” Ali gave her keeper an annoyed look as she set the alarm on her phone and then turned her bedside light off.

“I’m not a mind-reader and I can’t tell the future” the blonde chuckled.

“I’m not asking you to” Ali sighed, exasperated and tired. “I just wanted your educated opinion. Never mind.”

“Aw, don’t get mad” she rolled the top half of her body over and pulled her pouty wife closer to her. “I don’t see any reason why it wouldn’t work. Everything we do is in line with what she wants to do – make a difference, help people who don’t always get a fair shake, and fight for equality.”

“Yeah?” Ali finally turned her face, with a hopeful look on it, to her beautiful keeper and curled her body around hers.

“I’m just stating what I know of the facts ma’am” Ashlyn replied and giggled before kissing her wife’s soft lips. They both smiled into it and kissed some more before the blonde spoke again. “We’ll never be able to afford her though. She’s gonna be a rockstar and get recruited by a bunch of big firms. You just wait and see.”

Ali groaned.

“You couldn’t have just let me dream about it tonight before squashing it like that?” she chuckled ruefully.

“It’s not like she wouldn’t want to come work with us, I don’t think. But she’ll have so much debt from law school I think she’ll have to take one of the big jobs to pay it all off” Ashlyn explained and tried to get back in her wife’s good graces.
“Well what if we help her pay off her debt now, before it turns into huge debt with interest and all of that bullshit?” Ali sat up, excited by her new idea.

“Whoa, slow down honey. Who’s we?”

“Knight-Harris. There’s gotta be a way to make this work out” the brunette was thinking hard and she reached for her journal and pen on her nightstand. “What’s the tuition for a year at Harvard Law School?”

“Baby, it’s late” Ashlyn put her hand on top of Ali’s as she tried to open her journal. “You need your sleep. I think this is a great idea but I think we should work on it tomorrow. You’re only supposed to be working part-time right now anyway and you went into the office every day this week.”

“You’re right” she sighed and slumped her shoulders. “I’m just excited. I’d love to have Whit on the team and it would be great if we could help her pay for law school too.”

She put her journal and pen back on her nightstand and snuggled back into Ashlyn’s side.

“That would be awesome” the keeper agreed. “I’ve been trying to figure out something special to do for her to thank her for...everything” she paused and kissed Ali’s head. “Paying for law school wasn’t on my list” she chuckled. “But her parents are helping her too, so maybe it would only be paying for half of law school.”

“It sounds more doable all the time, doesn’t it?”

“It does. I love you and I love that you’re so good at all of this business stuff. Really” she pressed another kiss into her wife’s forehead. “And if I wasn’t so damned tired right now I’d be showing you how much I love your sexy brain and your hot body.”

Ali giggled and leaned up for a kiss and Ashlyn happily complied. They kissed softly for several minutes, just enjoying the feel of each other’s lips. They kept it sweet and simple because they were both exhausted.

“Thanks for another wonderful Saturday night” Ali mumbled against her wife’s lips before kissing them again.

“Ha ha, very funny” Ashlyn chuckled.

“I’m serious” Ali pulled back and looked into her favorite hazel eyes. “We’re all together, we had a fun time with Whit, we watched a really good soccer game and Christen finally got her Championship” she paused and caressed her wife’s cheek with her finger tips. “And I’m here in your arms, with your lips on mine and there’s nowhere else on earth I’d rather be.”

Ashlyn batted her eyes at the brunette, moved by how simple but wonderful their afternoon and night had been. They kissed again, exchanged I love yous, and drifted off to sleep.

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The rest of October sped by and before they knew it they were making plans for Thanksgiving and Christmas with their families. They had celebrated Ashlyn’s 36th birthday on October 19th with a small gathering at the big old house. It was a Tuesday and they played in the backyard in the late afternoon, those who could get there early, then they ate dinner and then they had cake and ice cream and sang Happy Birthday to the keeper. She had been more reflective than usual that night as she and Ali struggled with Drew at bathtime, trying to keep his cast dry. The blonde was helpful and present, but Ali could tell her mind was on something else.
“I just am so humbled today” she finally tried to explain as they finished cleaning up the kitchen after both kids were asleep for the night.

“You’re allowed to not be humble today babe, it’s your birthday” Ali replied as she closed the dishwasher door and studied her wife’s face carefully.

The dogs had just come in and Persey walked over to the blonde when she bent down near the kitchen sink. The brindle dog kept her eyes on Ashlyn as she wagged her tail and closed the distance between them. The keeper gave her some pats and a hug while she continued speaking with her wife.

“No, I mean, I know” she smiled softly at her beautiful brunette. “When it was time to make my wish and blow out the candles I realized there was nothing for me to wish for. We’ve been so blessed this year and it just felt greedy to wish for anything else.”

“Aw sweetheart” Ali hugged her once she straightened up and stopped patting the dog. “There’s your big heart feeling all sorts of things again, huh?” She felt Ashlyn hug her harder than usual and hold her close. “Are you ok? Do you want to talk about anything?”

“No” Ashlyn whispered from inside the hug. “I’m ok. Thank you though baby.”

Ali knew something was bothering her wife and she had some ideas about what it might be. The keeper was normally as ebullient and goofy and energized on her birthday as any person could possibly be. But she had been pensive and quiet and subdued for the better part of the day. She really wanted Ashlyn to talk to her about whatever was bothering her so they could figure it out together. The brunette knew her wife was tired of being cooped up and on restricted activity because of her broken leg. She was a professional athlete who worked out and trained and lifted weights and pushed her body every day. To go from that to the minor rehab exercises she had been doing for five weeks was enough to drive anybody crazy, forget about somebody who could be as fragile as Ashlyn sometimes could. The blonde was still seeing Mattie every other week so Ali knew nothing could go too wrong. Not for very long anyway.

“I love you so much Ashlyn. You know you can talk to me about anything, right?”

“I know honey. Thank you.”

The month finished out with Ashlyn getting her cast removed and then replaced with a walking cast instead. That meant that she could start doing lots more weight-bearing things like starting to walk a little bit or working out a little bit more. It had been six weeks since her surgery and she would have to get through six more weeks, maybe even longer, before she could take the next step forward in the healing and rehab process. The keeper had rehabbed enough injuries in her lifetime to know how frustrating and depressing they could be. In fact, she had never rehabbed an injury and not felt frustrated most of the time and depressed some of the time. It’s just how it went. She knew every athlete handled it differently, but for her, rehab was a lonely, frightening and painful time and she hated it with a passion. The only rehab she had not hated had been her most recent shoulder clean up surgery. But she was smart enough to know her feelings about that rehab were different because Ali had moved into the big old house with her to take care of her while she recovered from the surgery and started her painful rehab work. Everything felt magical during that special time and Ashlyn knew she couldn’t use that experience in her data grouping as she thought back over her multiple injuries. It was an aberration and it would skew all of the results.

But, as so often happened with the keeper when she got down about something or when the darkness started to keep the light at bay for longer than usual, Ashlyn always snapped out of it and got to work on her rehab. There was only one way to get it done and that was to do it and fight
through the pain and the atrophied muscles and the stiff joints. The only way to get back to where she needed to be was to set her jaw, lean her body into it and just start pushing the rock up the steep hill. That had worked for her each and every time up to that point in her career. But this time something felt different to the blonde. Something about her leg itself felt weird and something about the headspace she was occupying at the time felt very uncomfortable and foreign. It had been six weeks and by this point she was usually past the pity party and the wallowing and the feeling sorry for herself portion of the program. This time, although she was busy with her young family and was more distracted than usual, she was definitely still wallowing in self-pity and it was holding her recovery back.

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“Alright boo, what’s next?” Ali asked as she climbed down the ladder in the tall foyer of Sydney’s new house in Lynnfield.

It was the week before Halloween and the brunette was helping her best friend decorate early. Sydney wanted to make a good showing her first time in the new house. She and Dom loved the house and the neighborhood and they planned to stay there a long time. The coach wanted to make a good impression with her still newish neighbors.

“Just the last few streamers along the other side, just like what you did over here” she pointed where Ali had just hung a bunch of black and orange streamers and nodded her head. “Everything else I can handle” she grinned. “No ladders involved.”

Ali took a few minutes and moved the ladder, careful not to wipe out the chandelier as she switched to the other side of the foyer.

“You look good, how are you feeling? Everything still looking like the week of Thanksgiving for the delivery date?” she grunted under the awkward weight and length of the ladder as she moved it.

“Yes. Patty says everything looks good and I feel pretty good so, fingers crossed” she grinned at Ali who was climbing the ladder again.

It was remarkable to think about the difference between Sydney’s two pregnancies. She had been about as uncomfortable as possible when she had been pregnant with Cash. This time she was experiencing a much more ‘normal’ pregnancy, at least according to Dr. Comello. She would never throw another doctor under the bus if a patient came to her for a second opinion or for a second pregnancy as Sydney had done, but Patty was a straight shooter and wasn’t interested in pussyfooting around something if she thought it had a direct impact on her patient’s well-being and current pregnancy. The doctor had told Sydney and Dom, very plainly, that she recommended different things than their previous ob/gyn had and then took the time to explain to them why. In a nutshell, Patty believed that Sydney’s previous pregnancy would have been different and better if she had been more active from the get-go and spent less time in bed or on the couch waiting for the pain to pass. So this time Sydney was taking Dr. Comello’s advice and doing whatever she was told to do by the amiable and capable doctor, starting with being much more active and working out and walking as much as possible.

“And how are you doing?” the brunette glanced down at her best friend as she hung one end of the streamer section and then started down the ladder again.

“I’m ok. I feel so much more confident with Patty. I can’t really explain it.”

“You don’t have to tell me” Ali chuckled. “This is why I’ve been telling you for years that you should be seeing her.”
“Yeah, yeah, I know” the coach rolled her eyes and smiled warmly as the brunette re-positioned the ladder again. “But, seriously, I feel so much better having our birthing plan all mapped out and agreed on and everything. And” she paused for a second to sit down in one of the chairs in the foyer, “besides, if I do end up needing a c-section at least now you can tell me all about what goes on after that.”

“That’s very true” Ali agreed. “I like your optimism Syd. I have a good feeling about this one.”

“Thanks Alibaba” Sydney smiled sincerely at the brunette who finished hanging the streamer and was folding up the ladder. “I’ll take all the good feelings I can get” she chuckled. “The only thing I’m more afraid of than delivering this baby is having Dom’s family here for Thanksgiving that week. I know they planned it to be here for the baby and I appreciate it but, just, say that’s what it is instead of telling everybody that you’re coming for Thanksgiving and then making some weird joke about having a newborn baby at the wrong holiday gathering.”

“I don’t know how you’re going to get through that week” Ali laughed and then felt guilty a second later. “At least my in-laws are easy to be around. Dom’s step-mom is going to expect you to be in, like, hostess mode right after you have a baby isn’t she?”

“Pretty much” she groaned. “Dom has talked to his dad about it twice and he’s promised me that his dad gets it and will make sure Lisa isn’t a total monster.”

“Well I’m happy to be the one to tell her to her face when she’s here if she forgets” Ali gave her bestie a serious look. “I’m not kidding. I’ll make sure she understands what her role is while she’s here for Thanksgiving” Ali used air quotes.

“Good!” Sydney laughed out loud. “I knew I could count on you. And Vicki already told me I could just send them up to your Dad’s house for actual Thanksgiving if I wanted. No questions asked.”

They laughed again and then were quiet for a few minutes while Ali put the ladder away in the garage and then came back to join Sydney on the couch in the living room. Josie was asleep in her carrier on the floor in front of the couch.

“Life is so unfair sometimes” Ali said softly and emotionally as she began rubbing the coach’s feet and legs for her. Dom was doing what he had done last time – picking up extra shifts before the baby came so he could call in some favors and take some extra time off once the baby finally got here. “I’ve been so fucking lucky with both of my parents and then also with both of my step-parents. And my in-laws certainly aren’t perfect but they would do anything for me or my kids. Absolutely anything. And even my in-law step-parent is awesome” she continued after another minute of reflection. “Drew and Josie have seven grandparents who come visit and help out and are completely hands-on when it comes to them.”

“I feel like there’s a pep-talk in here somewhere boo, but I’m just not feeling it yet...” Sydney commented with a groan of pleasure as Ali worked a kink out of her sore calf muscle.

“Not really” Ali blushed a little in embarrassment. “I was just thinking about how lucky I am and how horrible Lisa is for you.”

“Oh, so pointing out your seven eager and capable helpers and comparing them to my one, thank you mom, is something you thought would help me how?”

Ali knew it was a rebuke but it was delivered with such softness that she could tell Sydney wasn’t really that upset about it. Either that or the leg massage was buying her all the forgiveness she would need to get out of the current spot she had put herself in.
“Technically you have three. I know Charles and Lisa live in England so it’s hard to count them... but they still count. I mean, if we’re just counting locally then I’ve only got two” Ali pleaded her case and both women ended up giggling before she was even finished. “And you know damned well that my dad would do anything for you and your family. So you should probably count he and Vicki and I should count your mom too.”

“So we each have three” Sydney nodded and grinned. Loving the idea that they both shared Sandi, Ken and Vicki. “See, I knew there was a pep-talk in there somewhere. Thanks boo.”
“No way Harris” Niki shook her head back and forth and frowned at her friend. “We’re not taking no for an answer again. We’ve already discussed it and they sent me as the messenger.”

“You drew the short straw huh?” Ashlyn smiled and tried to soothe Drew in her lap as he fussed about not being able to go to the beach that afternoon.

“Syd’s going to have her baby next month and then we’re going to lose those guys for a while” Niki tried to distract Drew with a toy she picked up from the coffee table. “Molly’s afraid that we’re going to let this fall apart and none of us really wants that. I mean, it’s a good group and we’re going to need it, all of us.”

Drew started to throw a temper tantrum and Ashlyn set him down on the floor in front of her.

“Watch out for his cast. It hurts like a...” she stopped even though her son couldn’t possibly have heard her over his own screaming.

“Can I do anything?” the coach asked, looking around the living room for something she thought the toddler might be interested in.

“Nah” Ashlyn replied loudly, so her friend could hear her over the din. “He’s mad because I told him we couldn’t go to the beach and now he’s just being a brat about it.”

“Well I could take him down there...”

“You’re the best for offering Nik, but he can’t go because he won’t keep his cast out of the water. Even if we put a plastic bag over it he rips it off” she shrugged her shoulders and let out a frustrated sigh. “It’s been a long six weeks.”

“Even better reason for date night on Friday” Niki grinned as she got down on the floor with Drew and started to play trucks in front of him, reaching for two or three different colored plastic toys from the toy bin behind her. “I’ll drive up here and drag you out of the house if I have to Ash.”

The two friends exchanged a long look and then Niki gave her attention to the boy in front of her who had finally stopped screaming and started moving one of the trucks around with his pudgy little hand. Ashlyn knew Niki was right. Ali was already back working part time and there was absolutely no reason for them not to be participating in the date night group. They had pushed it off because of the car accident but both she and Drew were able to get around well enough now. It would be nice to get out more and this was a guaranteed night out once a month, unless it was your turn to do the babysitting.

“How about we start back by being the babysitters first?” she proposed. “I could get on board with that. I get my walking cast tomorrow so I’ll be more mobile and can help Ali more with the kids.”

“That’s a very nice offer Ash, but Molly and I are babysitting this time. That part’s already been
decided. I’m just here to make sure you show up with your wife and kids. Because if I have to leave Molly alone with three boys while I drive up here to get you...”

Ashlyn chuckled because she knew her friend was serious. The keeper didn’t want to do that to Molly.

“Alright, alright” she agreed finally. “We’re in. What time should we have the kids there?”

“Anytime 5pm or later. But don’t make it later. Go out and have a nice time with your wife, will ya?”

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Ali had been ecstatic to hear that they were rejoining the date night group. She had been afraid of pushing Ashlyn too fast if she wasn’t ready after the accident. She also knew that her wife didn’t like to be the one who needed help while they were out in public. It wasn’t an ego or vanity thing as much as it was just a part of her chivalrous nature. It made the knight uncomfortable and restless when she couldn’t even help the queen out of the car, forget about slay whatever random dragon they might come across during their evening adventures. And, for the hundredth time, Ali was so thankful for Ashlyn’s good friends who knew her so well and were willing to go out of their way to help her when she needed it most. They didn’t see Niki and Molly as much as they used to because they were all so busy all the time. Noah was going to be six years old in December and little Evan had turned one back in April. Molly was four months pregnant with their third and they were both hoping for a little girl to add to the family. The three families, the Crosses, Dwyers and Kriegers, were trying to schedule a big, week-long vacation up on the beach in Maine next summer so they could all hang out and relax together. Whitney and Ryan were invited too but all the other couples made sure they knew that none of them would hold it against them if they chose not to join the mayhem. They were shooting for August and, so far, everybody was in.

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Ali had always loved Arlington. It was where she had lived with Emily for five years and she had lots of fond memories of the town, despite the heartbreak of the doomed relationship. They had both been practically broke and lived in a tiny apartment by the elevated, public bike path. The bike path stretched from Bedford all the way into North Cambridge where one of the subway lines ended. It was ten miles of an old railroad that had been paved over and turned into a bike and jogging path. It was called the Minuteman Bikeway and it cut through Lexington and Arlington along the way from Bedford to the city. The brunette could see the path clearly from her third floor, living room window because their apartment building sat right next to it. Niki and Molly’s house was in a more suburban part of Arlington but not too far away from the downtown area and it was a quick five-minute drive up to the main drag after Ali and Ashlyn dropped Drew and Josie off for the evening.

“It’ll be fine Ali” Molly beamed at her as she took the baby and snuggled her close. “I promise, if anything comes up we’ll call you. I promise.”

“She’s not sick, she doesn’t have a cold or anything” Ali explained quickly as Niki escorted her to the door, “but she gets stuffed up sometimes when she sleeps so if she wakes up fussy use the suction thing...”

“We know all about it Al” Niki smiled warmly at the nervous mom. “Evan was the same way. I don’t know what we would have done without that blue suction bubble thing” she chuckled. “Poor kid probably would have drowned in his own snot.”

It was a disgusting thought but it was so completely accurate that Ali couldn’t help but laugh out
She hugged Niki goodbye and went back out to the truck to drive her date to dinner. They parked in the municipal lot behind the stretch of Massachusetts Avenue where the restaurant was located. It was the first Sushi restaurant that had opened in Arlington over ten years ago, at least, and it had been Ali’s favorite. She told Ashlyn stories about bringing different friends there over the years and had the blonde laughing so hard she had tears in her eyes. The story about the guy who had never been to a sushi restaurant before was her favorite. He didn’t know what wasabi was and didn’t want to disturb the whole group as they listened to another friend’s story. So the poor guy just picked up the whole clump of wasabi and ate it. The story was hysterical and had a happy ending that didn’t involve the emergency room either.

The happy couple ate and laughed and talked for almost two hours. Ali, as usual, was quite good with chopsticks. Ashlyn on the other hand, had never been able to get the hang of using them. And she had tried too. That’s what made her so frustrated about it. She had gotten to the point where she just asked for a regular set of silverware along with the chopsticks when she ordered and hung her head for the moment of embarrassment that she always felt. It didn’t make any sense to either of them why she couldn’t figure out how to use chopsticks. Lord knew she was good with her hands and her fingers were supremely talented, but none of that seemed to matter when it came to picking up something slippery with two skinny pieces of wood. Ali tried not to laugh at her but it was so hard because Ashlyn looked so cute while she tried to use them. The sticks got her full concentration and, after a minute of really trying hard, her tongue would sneak out the side of her mouth just a little bit as she increased her focus.

“I love you whether you ever figure those things out or not babe” the brunette smiled at her frustrated wife. “And I admire your persistence” she nodded. “Most people wouldn’t even try anymore, but you always give it a shot. I respect the hell out of that.”

“I have never spent as much time and energy trying to learn how to do anything with such shitty results” Ashlyn admitted with a frustrated sigh. “Except maybe speaking Spanish. I could understand a lot of it and read it pretty well but I couldn’t get the words to come out no matter how hard I tried in college.”

The keeper blushed a little and looked up at her beautiful wife who was still smiling back at her. Ali reached her hand across the table and Ashlyn took it with her own small smile.

“Thank you for letting me bring you here Ash. I know sushi’s not your favorite.”

“Honey” Ashlyn took Ali’s hand in both of hers and rubbed the back of it with her thumbs as she gazed into her wife’s cinnamon eyes. “I’d go anywhere with you, especially when you look like that.”

“Wow, it has been too long since we’ve been on a date if you think this outfit looks good” Ali chuckled as she looked down at her dressy pants and deep purple blouse that she still didn’t wear tucked in because her stomach wasn’t back to where she wanted it to be yet.

It had only been four months since she had Josie and although things felt good again on the inside, Ali had work to do on the outside before she felt confident about her body again. She wasn’t beating herself up about it or anything, but she wasn’t satisfied yet either. Her goal was to get back in good shape before they went to Miami for Christmas so she could wear a bathing suit at the beach and feel good about it.

“You look beautiful in that outfit” Ashlyn complimented. “But that’s not what I’m talking about.”

Ali gave her keeper a confused half-smile and a little tilt of her head.
“Your face Al” Ashlyn smiled as she spoke. “I love when your face looks like this. It happens when you’re showing me something for the first time, when you’re sharing something that you love with me” she paused for a few seconds until Ali ducked her head a little and then looked up through her lashes at her again, just a tiny bit shy. “You’ve never looked more beautiful than you do right now, telling me all about the fun times you had in this restaurant and the other places here in town where you spent so much time.”

“Oh Ashlyn...” the brunette tried to say something more but she was just so touched by her wife’s sweet words.

“Well, if I’m being totally honest, anytime you’re naked you look more beautiful but that’s not really a fair comparison so I just decided to leave those times out...”

Ali laughed out loud and threw her head back, her hand still being held by both of the blonde’s. She could be with this woman for another fifty years and she would never understand how Ashlyn could do that – just slide so effortlessly from such sweet, heartfelt sentiments back into something silly or raunchy or goofy in the next heartbeat without ruining the original moment.

After dinner they took some time and walked the two blocks to one of the entrances to the bike path. It was dark out but the path was pretty well-lit with lamp posts and there were more than a few people biking, walking and running at 7:30pm. Ashlyn had just gotten her mini-scooter for her leg so she didn’t have to use crutches all the time. She knelt with her bad leg on the scooter and there was a harness that hung behind the ‘seat’ that supported her lower leg, still in the walking cast. She had to be careful to keep her weight up on her thigh, but if she did that she could get around much easier with the scooter. After six weeks of crutches her armpits were sore and practically torn up from all of the abuse they had taken. She hadn’t actually ripped the skin there yet, but she was perilously close. She and Ali walked along the path for about fifteen minutes, the brunette with her hand hooked into the back of Ashlyn’s elastic waistband, and enjoyed each other’s company. It was cool and they wore coats and Ali had a pretty purple scarf that blew behind her when the wind picked up every once in a while.

“Molly runs on this almost every day” Ashlyn offered. “She puts Evan in the jogger and just pushes him along. He loves it.”

“It’s so nice here, closer to the city, with all of these great park spaces and these bike paths and things like that” Ali added as they turned around to walk back. “It’s so much closer to all the great things Boston and Cambridge have to offer. But I’d never trade our house and our beach and our ocean...” she rubbed Ashlyn’s lower back and tried to lean into her which knocked the keeper off-balance and off the scooter.

“Ali!!” she yelped as she hopped off to avoid going down in a heap.

“Oh my God! I’m so sorry” she exclaimed as she stepped around the back of the downed scooter to try and help hold her wife up, wrapping her arms around her waist and bracing her legs to take her extra weight.

Ashlyn laughed. It was a big, full, belly laugh that eventually overtook both women as they stood there on the edge of the bike path in the dim light of the nearest lamp post. They hugged and held each other through the laughter as they slowly caught their breath and brushed the tears of laughter that had dampened both of their faces.

“Baby” the keeper chuckled again. “I can stand up on my own now. Remember? Walking cast?” she said and wiggled her new cast out to the side a little.
“Oh geez” Ali replied with a giggle. “I forgot. It’s a good thing you didn’t strap your leg into that harness like they told you to.”

“This isn’t my first rodeo honey” Ashlyn grinned at her wife and her dimple appeared. “But as good as I am on that thing” she nodded down at the scooter, “I still can’t keep it upright when somebody just all of a sudden decides they want to join me on it.”

Ali had relaxed her stance and was now standing in front of the blonde with her hands on Ashlyn’s hips. She quirked her eyebrow at Ashlyn and spoke in a seductive voice.

“Well I can’t help it. I wanted to be close to you” she pouted and her bottom lip stuck out.

“All you had to do was ask...” Ashlyn replied softly and started to bring their lips together in a romantic kiss.

“Oh your left!” a cyclist shouted as he sped past them, making them both laugh again.

“Well we should go pick the kids up and head home” Ali suggested as she bent over and righted the scooter.

“Are you sure?” the keeper asked with a playful grin. “It’s still early and you know it’s frowned upon to return from date night before 9pm.”

They ended up going back to Niki and Molly’s house and talking to them for the next hour or so, with Sydney and Dom joining them just before 9pm.

“What the hell are you two doing back here before 9pm?” Sydney demanded harshly before hugging Ali tightly.

“We’re out of practice” the brunette offered lamely.

“And we almost got run over walking on the bike path” Ashlyn chuckled.

“Man” Sydney shook her head and smiled at her best friend. “You always did love that bike path.”

“It always felt like an oasis” the brunette tried to explain. “Like a secret garden in the middle of the city or something like that.” She paused and shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know. I’m weird. What can I say?”

Later that night, after successfully transferring a sleeping Drew from the truck to his own bed and giving Josie half a bottle to settle her down and then putting her back to bed, Ali found her wife standing in her studio on the third floor. She was still dressed in her black track pants and nice polo shirt from their date. Ashlyn was looking out the side window down towards the beach and the ocean and her diamond earrings and long, silver necklace sparkled in the moonlight. Her arms were folded across her chest and Ali was struck, as she often was, by how strong and beautiful her keeper’s body was. For all of the injuries she had suffered, Ashlyn always got her body with its’ gorgeous muscles back in supreme shape. Ali felt her core twitch as she drooled over her sexy wife and then crossed the room quietly to stand behind her.

“You look so fucking sexy standing here” Ali whispered into the blonde’s ear as she pressed herself up into her ass and back, holding her tightly around her middle with two strong arms. “You’re all lit up by the moon” she exhaled as she brought a hand up and scratched at the back of her neck and the short hair there. “The only way you could possibly look any fucking hotter is if you were naked” she mumbled as she worked her lips down her wife’s neck from her spot behind her. “Jesus Christ Ashlyn...”
The keeper moaned a little at the attention from her wife and reached her long arms behind her to grab two handfuls of Ali’s curvaceous ass. She felt a ripple of desire travel all throughout her body as she groped and squeezed and massaged what was arguably her favorite body part on her beautiful brunette. Ashlyn felt her heart rate increase as Ali started to spread her fingers and hands all across her stomach and chest and breasts, underneath her close-fitting polo shirt. The brunette grazed the blunt end of her short nails against Ashlyn’s nipples over the smooth fabric of her bra. Ali grinned against the blonde’s neck when she realized Ashlyn wasn’t wearing one of her typical sports bras, but one of her prettier, sexier ones instead.

“Hnmnnnnmm” she hummed against her neck. “Did you wear something soft and sexy for me tonight?” her voice was raspy with desire and Ali was surprised at how turned on she had gotten in just a matter of five minutes or so.

“Maybe” Ashlyn replied coyly, shrugging her shoulders. “You’ll have to wait and see” she smirked.

“You know how impatient I get” the brunette whined softly and slowly. “I want to see you” she breathed out and rested her forehead against the back of her wife’s strong shoulder blade while her hands continued to roam around Ashlyn’s front. “I want to see all of you, glowing in the moonlight” she managed to get out before groaning in pleasure as her keeper continued to work both hands up and down the back of her thighs and ass. “Fuck...that feels so good.”

Ali dragged one hand down past Ashlyn’s stomach and across her hips, playfully slipping her fingers beneath the waistband of her track pants. She loved the way her keeper tensed when her fingers touched her warm, smooth skin there.

“Jesus Al” she sucked in a breath and closed her eyes for a moment, trying to steady herself.

She was incredibly horny and couldn’t wait to taste every inch of Ali’s body. But her leg was killing her. She had been on it a lot that evening and, more importantly, it hadn’t been elevated in several hours and was throbbing painfully at the moment. She swallowed hard as the brunette teased her with her fingers, above her underwear, fingertips grazing the tops of her warm thighs. Ali felt her wife shudder at her touch and smirked as she leaned back and pulled her hand out of her pants. The brunette tugged on the bottom of Ashlyn’s shirt and the keeper immediately brought both hands to her own neck to unbutton it, raising her arms straight up in the air as Ali lifted it over her head and dropped it on the floor behind them. She pressed hot kisses down Ashlyn’s back, slowly moving from the base of her neck down to the waistband of her pants, while she trailed her fingers down her sides leaving goosebumps behind.

“This is definitely soft and sexy” Ali murmured as she turned her wife around to face her and admired the black satin bra with the white skull and crossbones between the two cups at the front.

“Happy Halloween” Ashlyn purred in a dark, needy voice before crashing their lips together in a hard, passionate kiss.

The force of the kiss surprised the brunette and she stepped back before she regained her balance and returned the kiss eagerly and with just as much passion. She ghosted her hands around Ashlyn’s breasts, still in their cups, and up and down her sides and back as they made out slowly. The keeper moved her hands to work on the buttons of Ali’s soft and silky blouse, starting at the top and finally getting the last one undone at the bottom. The brunette gasped when Ashlyn squeezed both of her breasts hard before removing the shirt or the bra standing in her way. The keeper reached around behind her wife and unhooked the bra, then started to unbutton the dark grey dress pants she still wore. When Ashlyn had those pants pushed down past Ali’s hips as far as she could reach without breaking the kiss, she brought her hand up between her wife’s legs and cupped her wet folds, still trapped behind her damp panties. Ali groaned loudly and they broke the kiss for air, both panting as
they looked hungrily at each other through dark, lidded eyes.

They paused for only a couple of seconds before they each hurriedly took their own clothes off, dropping them to the floor as they went. Ali finished first, which was unusual because Ashlyn was, by far, the faster clothes-taker-offer. When the brunette looked up at her wife she saw frustration and anger on her beautiful, chiseled face. She looked down where Ashlyn’s eyes were boring holes into her cast which had stopped her from taking her pants and underwear off – again.

“I’m so fucking sick of this goddamned fucking cast” she complained angrily and tried to rip the underwear off by pulling it apart at the seams with both hands.

“Hey, I’ve got it” Ali quickly saved the matching black satin boyshorts with the skulls on them. She got on her knees in front of her keeper and took a steadying breath because all she could see and smell was her wife’s passion and it was making her crazy with want. Ali eased the track pants down past the cast and pulled them all the way off. “There we go” she said seductively as she placed a hot, open-mouthed kiss to Ashlyn’s right thigh. It took all of her self-control not to take her right then and there and start fucking her with her mouth. Ali carefully slid the sexy boyshorts down the cast and was about to pull them all the way off of Ashlyn’s foot when she saw how dark red and swollen her toes were. “Shit Ash, we need to get your leg up...”

“Fuck that” Ashlyn husked out, anger still in her voice.

“Babe, your toes are swollen and you must be in pain” Ali’s voice was full of tender concern as she finished removing the underwear and felt her wife’s toes. “They’re a thousand degrees” she looked up at her keeper as she quickly calculated how much she must have been on her feet that evening. “Come on, let’s...”

“I don’t care about that right now” Ashlyn growled, her face darkening into a mixture of need and frustration.

“Well I do” Ali said with bite of her own as she stood up, head still swimming in the intoxicating scent of her love’s passion.

“Al, I’m so sick of having to plan around this stupid thing. I just want to fuck you” her voice lowered even further. “I need to taste you and feel you...”

“Then quit fighting with me and come over here and lie down” Ali tugged her by her hand a little, careful not to pull too hard and topple her over with the new walking cast. “All I can smell is your fucking pussy and I want it in my mouth right this fucking minute” she took a quick beat and tried to stay calm before continuing. “So hurry up.”

Ali knew what her wife was feeling. She understood the frustration very well because she had experienced it time and time again as they started having sex after her post-partum green light from Dr. Comello. There had been no such thing as spontaneous, unscripted sex until Ashlyn had been convinced she wasn’t going to hurt the brunette. It was the only way. It was the right way. But it fucking sucked because Ali had been tired of being careful. She didn’t want to be the new mom with the freshly approved vagina and the sore boobs. She wanted to feel sexy and free and instead she felt like an old, decrepit invalid who needed to be treated with kid gloves and fucked ‘safely’ and ‘smartly’.

“Just forget it” Ashlyn’s voice was sad and defeated, not even angry anymore as she let the brunette lead her to the couch and sit her down on it.

“Ash” she started softly as she moved her wife down to the middle of the couch and stacked both
pillows up near the end of it so she could stretch her right leg out on top of them and rest the back of her calf on the arm of the couch. “I know how you feel and I’m sorry honey” she knelt next to the couch and kissed her wife’s lips sweetly.

“No you don’t” Ashlyn challenged, for no other reason than she was angry at her leg.

“Yeah, I do” Ali answered firmly as she brought her lips down to the blonde’s breast and started sucking and licking all around it. “Remember all those times you made me go slow after both babies?” she sucked hard on Ashlyn’s nipple while she waited for her to reply. When she didn’t reply Ali kept working on her breasts and continued talking while her hands explored other areas of soft skin on her keeper’s beautiful, naked body. “I felt like I was ruining everything and I couldn’t imagine anything less sexy than having to be careful because I was sore or swollen or scared.” She could feel Ashlyn’s body responding to her ministrations and she smiled against the skin by her belly button, running her left hand up through her folds and then licking the juices off of her fingers with a moan as she leaned across Ashlyn’s stomach. “You kept telling me you didn’t care about going slow and planning things out. You said you still wanted me just as much and that you always would. Fuck, you taste good” she closed her eyes as her own passion flooded between her legs at the taste she had been craving. She could see the lust in her keeper’s eyes and knew she had her back again. “Well I believed you babe. And I’m telling you the same thing right now. You didn’t ruin anything. I want you just as much right now as I did ten minutes ago, more probably...” she moved her mouth back up the blonde’s body, kissing and sucking along the way. “But we’re going to be smart about your leg” she finished talking when she got to Ashlyn’s mouth and kissed her hard and slow and deep, leaving no doubt about how much she wanted her and loved her and desired her.

There was a long, lingering moment after the kiss where they looked into each other’s eyes. Ali’s left hand continued to wander around her wife’s body while her right hand clutched at the short hair at the back of Ashlyn’s neck. In that moment, the keeper knew in every part of her that Ali was telling her the truth. She was forced to come to the same realization that her brunette had all those previous times. It was frustrating and annoying as hell, but, at the same time, there was a trust that would not be shaken, no matter what kind of foul mood her leg pushed her into.

“I love you, I’m sorry, fuck that feels good” all came out of the blonde’s mouth in a rush of passionate words as her body responded to Ali’s hand between her legs. “Please get on my face” she begged in a strangled voice as all the pent-up passion made her sound desperate. “I need to taste you.”

Ali’s clit ached when she heard her wife’s request and the urgency behind it. She thought for a minute about some of the information they had learned in the lesbian club in Provincetown earlier in the month. One of the women had said she sat on her lovers’ faces but faced backwards because the view was better. The brunette had wanted to try it ever since. She gave her wife another hot, steamy kiss and then climbed on top of her, straddling her head but facing down the rest of her sexy body. Ashlyn’s hands grabbed greedily at her thighs and hips as she slowly figured out what Ali was doing. She leaned to the side and bit the inside of one of the brunette’s thighs, hard, in her impatience.

“Ow” Ali whimpered softly and sucked in a breath as her desire rose even further. “Just hold on a second” she breathed out unevenly as she finally got into place.

Ashlyn didn’t wait more than another two seconds before she was pulling her wife’s soaking wet pussy down onto her face and groaning up into it.

“Oh fuck yes baby. Jesus you taste so fucking amazing” she husked out as she moved her tongue through Ali’s slick folds, making her shiver at the contact.
“Mmmmmmm, yeah. Oh that feels so good” she purred back, her eyes closing for a minute as she settled into place on her keeper’s face.

Ali leaned over and put her hands to work on Ashlyn’s breasts, palming the nipples and then pinching and tugging on them as her wife moaned her approval. The view from here was better, and once she leaned forward more, the angle was just as good for what her keeper was doing with her tongue. After several more minutes of panting, moaning, whimpering and groaning from both of them, Ali could feel her orgasm starting to take shape. She also could feel her own desire to taste Ashlyn increasing exponentially the more turned on she got. The brunette felt like an idiot for a second and vowed not to admit it afterwards. She realized that all she had to do was bend all the way over and she could be eating out her sexy wife at the same time. They were practically in the 69 position already, she just had to bend over more. She didn’t waste another minute beating herself up over it. She just bent over, loving the way Ashlyn’s stiff nipples poked her lower abdomen as she pressed her own into her keeper’s body, and moved her wife’s left leg out and to the side so she could get to the sweet spot she had been longing for.

“Fuck Al” the blonde grunted when she figured out what was happening. “Unnnnhhhhh, shit that’s good.”

Ali had some catching up to do and she got right to it. She pressed a quick swirl around Ashlyn’s clit and then moved lower, sucking through her swollen lips and moaning loudly at the sweet taste and delicious scent of one of her favorite places in the entire world. The brunette felt her keeper’s pace and rhythm fall off a little bit as she got distracted by Ali’s strong tongue and powerful mouth moving between her legs. She brought her right hand to Ashlyn’s folds and got her fingers nice and wet from all of her passion before plunging them into her keeper’s pulsing pussy. Ali pumped hard and fast when she felt how wet her wife was inside and it didn’t take very long for her walls to start grabbing at her fingers as Ashlyn got closer to her release. The brunette was so worked up as she felt and heard and saw and smelled and tasted everything that made sex with Ashlyn so fucking awesome that she thought she would come at any second. The only reason she hadn’t come yet was because her keeper had left her clit alone in an effort to get them both as close to the same level as possible.

“Ashlyn, unnnnnhhhhhh, yeah...shit that’s good.”

Ali felt her own legs start to lose their strength. There wasn’t really much room for them to slide anywhere, at least not her right leg which was pressed up against the back of the couch. Her left leg could fall off the front edge of the couch at any minute and she made an effort to lean more on her right leg to try and keep that from happening. Ashlyn felt the shift, so in tune with her wife’s body, and reassured her.

“Don’t worry sexy, I’ve got you. You’re not going anywhere. Just relax and let go.”

“Are you close?” Ali husked out hopefully as she continued thrusting two fingers into Ashlyn’s hot center and working on her clit with her tongue.

Anytime her wife’s core was an inch away from her face Ashlyn was close to coming. It was just impossible for her not to get overly excited by it. She had definitely cooled down when she had her hissyfit about her cast, but with the way Ali was sucking on her clit right now it wouldn’t take very long for her to reach her climax.

“Yeah, unnnnnhhhh...fuck, I’m close” she groaned out, her mouth full of Ali’s pussy lips. “God you feel so good.”

As if to prove her point, the keeper’s left thigh trembled under Ali’s hand and the brunette redoubled
her efforts with both her mouth and her fingers. Ashlyn was close and when she felt her own leg spasm she knew it was time to get back to work on her beautiful brunette. She’d been in a glorious, delicious holding pattern for the past several minutes – just slowly eating her out and massaging her thighs. But now Ashlyn moved her fingers to Ali’s clit and started to rub it, gently at first. She scratched her fingertips through her wife’s short, dark hairs by her mound, tugging slightly, and then moved back to her sensitive nub. The long, low groan that came out of Ali’s mouth when she felt the pleasurable sensations coming from her wife’s nimble fingers only made the blonde work harder and faster.

“Jesus Christ” the brunette panted out. “Fuck. Yessssss!!!!” she yelled as she came even faster than Ashlyn thought she would.

Her legs gave out and she landed, gracelessly and gloriously, on Ashlyn’s chest as her orgasm took over. Her muscles tensed and released and she shook all over. She tried to keep moving her fingers and mouth to bring her wife with her but her motions were too sporadic. Ashlyn finally reached down with her own fingers and moved them over her own clit quickly, tilting her hips up to get the angle just right. Ali moved her mouth out of the way and, instead, bit down hard on the inside of her wife’s left thigh.

“Shit! Ali!!!!!!!” the keeper shouted as she came hard, her body jerking wildly against her beautiful brunette.

They lay here together like that for several minutes, panting and trying to catch their breath. Ali pulled her fingers out of her wife and took her time licking them clean, humming as she enjoyed her treat. She rested her head against Ashlyn’s thigh and enjoyed being close to the woman she loved so much. Ashlyn was on cloud nine. Her orgasm had been powerful and she almost thought she was going to cry, as Ali sometimes did when she came. But instead, a sort of euphoric feeling came over her and she pressed kisses into the back of her wife’s thighs, right next to her head, and sighed contentedly.

“Are you ok baby?” the keeper asked and ran her hands up and down Ali’s back and then settled them back onto her ass.

“Oh yeah” the brunette replied, still a little breathless. “So good babe. How about you?”

“That felt fucking great” Ashlyn answered with a smile Ali could hear even though she couldn’t see it. “No matter what fucked up place my mind starts to go to, you, and this, always make me feel like I can rule the world. I don’t know how the hell you do it, but it’s a scientific fact.”

“It’s like our bodies know what to do and what we need and we just have to keep our damned heads out of it sometimes, right?” Ali agreed and kissed her keeper’s thigh again, soothing the bite mark that she had left with her aggressive chomp a few minutes earlier.

“Exactly” Ashlyn leaned her neck forward a little bit and started to lick her wife’s still too sensitive folds, making Ali squeal and flinch. She settled for licking all of the spilled passion at the top of her strong thighs instead, letting out a satisfied sigh as she got to work. “Mmmmm.”

Ali idly traced the siren tattoo on the blonde’s right thigh with her fingertips, well the part she could reach anyway. She moved her hand down and traced the stern of the ‘Mary Sarah’ tattoo that appeared on the inside of Ashlyn’s thigh, happily wondering when she was going to get Josie’s name added to the schooner and where she would put it.

“Did you mean what you said?” Ashlyn asked after another several minutes in the same position. She was thrilled and surprised that Ali was letting them stay that way for so long. “About living here
instead of closer to the city?"

“What?” Ali lifted her head and looked up at her wife but couldn’t see past her own ass to get a read on what Ashlyn was talking about.

“You know, when we were on the bike path, right before you knocked me off my scooter” she chuckled at the memory.

“Oh,” Ali grinned. “Yeah, absolutely. I wouldn’t trade living here with you for anything honey” she explained and kissed her keeper’s leg again. “I know it can be a pain sometimes if we’re trying to get someplace fast, or trying to get back home fast before one of the kids falls asleep or whatever. But there’s no place I’d rather be than right here in this house with you. I’ve never been more sure of anything in my whole life.”

“Aww baby, you’re gonna make me cry” Ashlyn squeaked out as her emotions threatened to get the better of her again.

They were quiet for another few minutes, just caressing each other and trying not to fall asleep. Ali started to giggle, quietly, but there was no hiding anything from each other in their current positions.

“What’s so funny?” the keeper asked.

“Oh honey” Ali exhaled and giggled again. “I just can’t get over how good you are with your fingers. I mean, I’ve gotta be the luckiest woman in the world” she replied honestly.

“What’s funny about that?” the blonde asked a little defensively, playfully smacking Ali’s ass.

“Nothing, it’s just that I can’t believe you can do so many amazing things with those fingers and then still be so bad with chopsticks” she burst out laughing, unable to control herself.

“Keep it up Krieger” Ashlyn challenged her wife. “Then see how many amazing things these magic fingers stop doing to my lucky wife.”

“Oh come on” Ali teased. “It’s funny and cute and it makes me love you even more you big jerk.”

“Nope, too late” Ashlyn pretended to be offended.

“Ok, so I hope you enjoyed this because I won’t be hanging out in this position ever again then.”

“No” Ashlyn was aghast. “Don’t even joke about that.”

“Then you’d better get those magic fingers back to work, wife!”

They both laughed and Ashlyn helped the brunette turn around and come back up so they could share a long, sweet kiss.

“Anything for you my queen.”
End of the Year 2021

Chapter Notes

I hate my job today so I'm playing hooky for the afternoon. Shhhhh....
So here's today's chapter a little earlier than usual. And I'm going to write all afternoon.
Yay!!

The Christian Agnew problem didn’t just go away, as much as everybody at Knight-Harris wanted it to. The company took a major hit publicly by sticking to their guns and not trying to sweep the boorish behavior of their agent under the rug. It had taken several meetings among the shareholders to make a final determination about which course of action to take initially. Ali, Ashlyn, Hilary and Jared were still the only shareholders and they were the decision makers for the company. They needed a fifth shareholder for several reasons, most of which had to do with growing the company, but one of the most important reasons was to avoid a deadlock when it came to big decisions like this one. Ali and Jared wanted to come clean and meet the problem head-on. They wanted to hold a press conference with Kamala Pierce and just put the problem out there and then immediately and publicly correct it. Ali was the main force behind this approach. Jared was still angry about being fooled by Christian and didn’t take long to join the brunette’s side. But both Ashlyn and Hilary, the two name partners, were understandably concerned about the PR hit they would take personally as well as from a company standpoint.

“But it’s a calculated hit Hil” Ali tried to explain, again, as they met in early December before the hockey star returned home to Idaho for the NWHL’s holiday break in the schedule. “We’re going to take a hit no matter what happens. It’s inevitable. If we are the ones controlling the message and leading the way with transparency and honesty then we have a chance to come out looking almost like the good guys when it’s all said and done. If we do it right, people will be praising us for doing the right thing and, hopefully, the only bad guy will be Christian.”

“It’s easy for you to say” Hilary spoke carefully, glancing at Ashlyn across the conference room table in their office building before continuing. “You’re not the one whose name is on the sign on the building.”

Ali had heard that one more times than she could stand anymore and bit her tongue hard to keep from blowing up at her colleague and friend. The jut of her jaw and heavy rise and fall of her chest communicated her frustration just as well, whether she wanted it to or not.

“Listen, we know it’s you two on the hook with your names” Jared tried to move things along. “But, no offense, Ali and I are the ones in here every day dealing with everything. Just because our names aren’t on the building doesn’t mean we don’t have just as much invested in this thing as you guys do.” He paused and swallowed as he tried to read the faces of the two athletes. He hated to play that card because he and Ali both knew they wouldn’t have a company at all without Hilary Knight and Ashlyn Harris and their two names. “You know I get we wouldn’t be here without you two” he started in a calm and level voice, “and I hate that this asshole is dividing us like this. But we have to move forward or we’re going to lose our chance to control the narrative. Christian won’t come forward willingly so we don’t have to worry about him, but Kamala’s getting impatient. And who knows what her mother will do, or when. If we wait any longer, we may as well just forget about even trying to do what Ali’s suggesting.”
It had been a frustrating six weeks of inaction while they gathered information and planned the best course of action. Some of the shareholders had made phone calls to their most trusted clients to talk with them about the situation and get their feedback.

“We can get some of our top clients to do testimonials and help us steer the message we want to deliver” Ali tried to assuage their fears. “If we do this right we could even see growth because of it instead of losing clients as a result of burying our head in the sand and letting some dick get away with more typical dickish behavior, no offense Jared” she looked at the Director of Media and nodded before continuing, “while we all suffer because of it.”

“Kamala did tell me that she’s never had any issues with anybody else here” Ashlyn finally joined in the debate. “And she loves working with Sela now” she paused reflectively. “I really do think this could work, but I don’t want to do something you’re not ready or willing to do Hil. I won’t make you sign up for something you’re not comfortable with.”

As frustrated as Ali was with her wife at the moment this was a perfect example of why Ashlyn was too good for this world sometimes. Ali knew that her wife wanted to move forward with her proactive plan but she didn’t want Hilary to feel abandoned so she was keeping the vote split until Hilary had a chance to come around to their way of thinking. It was just taking too damned long.

“You talked to her?” Hilary asked her friend with a quirked eyebrow.

“Yeah, I did” the keeper replied with a shrug. “I wanted to tell her how sorry I was that we let her down and that we got fooled by that prick and she was the one who had to pay the price. We had a good talk.”

Hilary was, by far, the least involved of the four shareholders and Ali was sure she hadn’t bothered to pick up the phone and call the young basketball star they were all making money off of. But the upside to Hilary’s indifference was that Ali could run the company the way she wanted to, for the most part, without having to worry about checking with the often-absent founding partner. The scenario worked well for everybody, except in this particular situation.

“We can take a break if you want to call her yourself” Jared offered, trying to be helpful, sensing Hilary was close to giving in.

“No” Hilary shook her head and sighed. “I trust you” she looked at Ashlyn. “I trust all of you or I wouldn’t have agreed to this whole thing in the first place” she exhaled and gave them all a small smile. “I’m just so freaking terrified...”

“We’re all scared” Ashlyn replied seriously. “Companies go down because of shit like this and it’s taking every bit of self-control I have not to go and beat the crap out of Agnew right now” her eyes flashed with anger as she tried to stay calm. “But our clients know he’s the problem, not us. I haven’t had anybody tell me that they’re leaving because of him or because of this. Granted, I’ve only talked to a few of my friends about it but I honestly don’t think we’re going to lose a bunch of athletes because of this – if we handle it right.”

“I think we may win some back” Ali leaned forward on her elbows and lowered her voice. “I haven’t done it yet because it seems premature until we make our decision, but I’d be willing to bet that if I reach out to the four WNBA players we lost over the past two years they’ll tell me it was because of Christian. And I’m hoping we can get them to come back.”

They discussed a few more details of Ali’s plan and Hilary asked several more questions during the course of the next thirty minutes. Finally, Hilary had made up her mind.
“Ok, I’m in. Let’s do it” she stated quietly, looking each of her fellow shareholders in the eye, one at a time. “We just have to stay on-message and stick to the high road whenever some journalist tries to make us look like the bad guys. Right?”

“That’s it Hil” Ashlyn grinned at her. “We can do it, I know we can. And I appreciate you trusting us enough to jump in.”

“Well, even if we had stayed deadlocked I still think we should have gone with Ali’s plan” the hockey star added with a quick look at the brunette. When she saw all three other faces looking back at her like she had nine heads she clarified. “She’s the only one who voted against hiring him in the first place so she’s obviously got his number. We didn’t listen to her then so I figure she’s earned our support by now.”

The timing for their plan of attack couldn’t have been better. They owed that to Kamala Pierce though, because she had waited until the end of the season to come forward with her complaints in the first place. Now the playoffs were over and the draft wasn’t until mid-April. They were right in the middle of the WNBA off-season so hopefully it would be less disruptive to the players and teams that might be affected. K-H had given Christian time to come forward and do the right thing on his own but he lawyered up and denied everything. So the second week in December Ashlyn, Hilary, Ali and Jared all held a press conference in the large conference room of their own building. Kamala Pierce was there and read a statement of her own after Ashlyn read the company’s surprising admission of fault in hiring Christian Agnew. The keeper had gone on to say how proud they were of Kamala for coming forward and made sure everybody knew that the young basketball star had the company’s full support. The press conference wasn’t that well attended, but the handful of reporters who were there knew they had a hell of a story. The video clips spread all over social media within two hours and the Knight-Harris Company was inundated with requests for comments and interviews. Part of their game plan was to make themselves available for the next two days so everybody that had questions could get them asked and answered. When the reporters started asking questions at the press conference, Ashlyn stepped back, still in her walking cast, and watched as her wife took the podium and handled them all with honesty, courage and dignity. Ali set the tone for how the company would handle the crisis and showed the others how to answer the questions and spin them away from some of the inflammatory attempts to turn it into more of a scandal than it really was.

The soundbite of the day came when Ali was asked why any young female athlete should ever consider signing with K-H again. Ali had been expecting it and was ready for it, but delivered her answer with humility and sincerity. It came across as heartfelt and genuine because it was.

“That’s a great question and I think our answer is the same reason we started this company almost five years ago. Hilary and Ashlyn know better than anyone what it’s like to be a young female athlete. They wanted to form a company that would help other young women get good, honest representation that could guide them on their way to their first professional contract. None of that’s changed. Every decision we make here at Knight-Harris has that goal, that mission statement in mind. And that includes today’s event. This company is made up of human beings and we work hard and do our best to make sure all of our clients have everything they need to be successful so they can go out and achieve all of their gold medals and championship trophies and personal best records. But human beings make mistakes and we hired somebody who, frankly, isn’t good enough to be on our team. He fooled us and we’re embarrassed by that. But we’ll learn from our mistake and we won’t repeat it. We’re going to move on and be better and do better and get stronger because of it. He’s gone now. We fired Christian Agnew shortly after Kamala Pierce told us what she had gone through. We’re not going to just quietly shuffle him off to some other firm to continue his disgusting behavior somewhere else. The next firm that hires him won’t have any excuses. But, most importantly, we’re here to tell all of the Kamala Pierces out there that we believe you. We’re behind
you. We will help you fulfill your dreams. I don’t think there’s a better firm in the world for an athlete, male or female, who wants to be treated fairly and equitably. Just think about how we’ve handled this situation and then imagine how other firms would have conducted their business. How many other firms would have championed a 22 year old woman finishing her rookie season in the WNBA instead of falling all over themselves trying to defend the pig who sexually harassed her all season long? Ask yourselves that question and when you have the answer you’ll know why Knight-Harris is the best choice.”

The press conference and ensuing social media frenzy reached far and wide. Most people liked the way the company had come to the defense of the young athlete. There were always going to be those misogynistic assholes who spent hours in their dark apartments typing horrible things into their social media accounts, hiding safely behind their keyboards, and they were out in full force. But before Ali could even make phone calls to try and set up some testimonials from their most popular clients, many of their athletes jumped to the defense of K-H on their own. Julian Edelman was the first but he was quickly followed by the company’s newest big signing – Isaiah Thomas from the Boston Celtics. Other big-name athletes chimed in with their own tweets and posts offering support for Kamala Pierce and the company. Robert Kraft and Tom Brady added their voices to the din. Every team in the NWSL, NWHL and WNBA posted their thanks and support. The hashtag that was trending for those three days was ‘#ThankYouK-H’. It was impressive and moving and the support made everyone who worked at K-H feel good about what they did every day.

The four shareholders did interviews and answered questions, each one sticking to the script even when goaded with dumb comments and accusations by some of the journalists. Ashlyn and Hilary were the most popular, of course, and they did a great job of being their natural, friendly selves while still talking about the serious issues. By the time the three days was up, Knight-Harris was more popular and well-known than it had ever been before. And while they were appreciative of the positive outcome, they were mindful and respectful of what Kamala Pierce had suffered. They brought her name up and praised her courage and professionalism in every interview. By the time the third week of December rolled around, the issue had quieted down significantly. Ali and the rest of her team knew that Christian Agnew would try something but they weren’t really nervous about it because they had nothing to hide. They had laid all of their cards on the table. Kamala had decided not to press charges against him and Ali had explained that she was going to be more visible now than she had ever been before and they could help her win more and better endorsements because of it. It was sort of the silver lining to the whole thing.

And Ali was determined to learn from their mistake. She had the HR Manager and the head agent put together a system where all new clients were monitored on a regular basis to make sure the client/agent fit was a good one. Nothing would ever be perfect all of the time, but at least now there was a system of checks and balances set up to help as much as possible. It had been a stressful two months since Kamala had first brought her complaints to the K-H offices in mid-October but they had made it through it and come out on the other side, stronger than they had been before. When they all gathered together for the company holiday party at the end of the third week of December, the feeling of gratitude and appreciation for all that they had, both as individuals and as a company, filled the ballroom of the local hotel they had rented out. The speeches were more somber and subdued than usual and the celebration quieter and less flashy. But they celebrated nonetheless. Two months of a shitstorm couldn’t negate the other achievements they had made in the other ten months. The company Ali and Ashlyn had painstakingly built had taken a major hit. But, like proud parents, the two women marveled at the strength of what they had created as it stood strong and fought off the blows. That was the moment when Ali knew the company was going to make it and be truly successful. She had always believed in what they were doing, but to be exposed as they had been and to come out stronger in some ways after the battle was really something the brunette was proud of. She knew then that they had built something that would last.
Life went on while Knight-Harris stood its’ ground in November and December. By the end of November Drew had gotten his cast off of his healed up left forearm, screaming bloody murder when Dr. Comello used the special saw to cut it off. Both Ali and Ashlyn knew that there was no way it could hurt their son, but the saw looked and sounded scary as it moved along his arm. It was no wonder the 2-1/2 year old made such a ruckus. He was also freaked out by how strange and malformed his arm looked once the cast was off. It had been a long, ten weeks since he had last seen it but he was pretty sure it hadn’t looked like this. He kept sticking his arm out and showing both of his moms, as if they hadn’t noticed that anything was amiss and were ok with him going home with some weird, shriveled version of his own arm.

“It looks funny, huh bud?” Ali asked as she hugged him on the exam table and wiped a big, round tear off of his cheek. “It’ll look like your regular arm again real soon, I promise” she smiled reassuringly at her boy and rubbed his back while he kept staring at his arm.

“Wait until you see my leg when I get my cast off” Ashlyn raised her eyebrows up high and made a goofy face. “Will you come with me and help me be brave when it’s time to get mine off?”

“Um-kay, I will” he nodded, taking his eyes off of his arm and looking curiously at his mama. “It be ok” he showed her his arm again to try and make her feel better.

The little boy’s other major accomplishment was that he was almost completely potty trained. He hadn’t been ready in October but about half-way through November he started talking about it again. They had been reading the books to him ever since his second birthday, just sort of paving the way. Someone from his daycare must have started talking about it again because Drew was ready this time. Ali asked Miss Jeri, the woman who ran the daycare and was the sister of Sydney’s friend Alex from work, about it one afternoon when she picked him up and sure enough, one of his little buddies had just mastered the fine art of peeing on the potty and Drew was eager to catch up. He still had a few accidents at night but by the middle of December those were a rarity. The biggest adjustment had been for his moms who weren’t used to having potties positioned strategically around the house when he was first learning. It was a drawback of having such a big house. His little legs couldn’t get him to the bathroom fast enough most of the time so they just kept one in whatever room they were playing in at the time. So there was one in each of the four bathrooms of the house as well as one for downstairs.

“Mommy!!” he yelled as he ran to the mudroom door and wrapped his arms around Ali’s legs. He was more excited than he usually was when one of his moms came home from work and a little out of breath. “I did poops on da potty!!”

“Wow!!!” the brunette put her briefcase and purse down on the floor and bent over and hugged her son enthusiastically. “Great job baby boy!”

“Mommy” he stepped back and looked up at his mother, in her stylish skirt suit, with a furrowed brow and frustrated frown. “I not a baby. I use da potty. Ima big boy.”

“Oh my gosh you are absolutely right” she shook her head apologetically and scooped her big boy up in her arms. “You’re such a big boy now and I love you sooooooo much.” She winked at her wife who had watched the exchange with a dimpled grin from the doorway into the kitchen. “Which potty did you use? What were you doing when you knew you had to go poop? I want to know all about it” she asked with a kiss to his cheek as she carried him into the kitchen.

She paused in front of Ashlyn who helped her out of her heavy coat so she didn’t have to put Drew down. The boy was eagerly telling her about playing dinosaurs with mama when he felt the urge to
use the potty. The keeper gave her a quick kiss and then hung her coat up and put her briefcase and purse on the desk, grabbing her phone and putting it on the kitchen table so Ali would see it when they came back down for dinnertime. Ali continued talking to her son about his big day as she carried him up the backstairs so she could change her clothes. Josie would be up from her late afternoon catnap in about thirty minutes and then they could all sit together and eat dinner. Ashlyn’s grin remained on her face as she went back to getting dinner ready for her family, happier than she ever thought she could be. This was what it was all about. She had never felt more content or at peace in her life. Part of it, she knew, could be attributed to the near-death experiences her family had survived that summer. But part of it was just about doing the simplest things in the world with the people she loved more than life itself.

Josie was getting stronger and bigger every day but she was still very small for her age. Dr. Comello told the nervous moms that she might catch up and make up some ground during one of her growth spurts. Or not. She might just be smaller than other kids her age for the rest of her childhood. It was impossible to tell. But she was healthy. She had her fair share of colds and diaper rash, just like any 5-6 month old baby. And her skin was really dry, in general. Dr. Comello encouraged both moms to read up on the mysteries of redheads so they could be prepared for some of the unique challenges the usually fair-skinned carrot-tops faced. Drew’s skin and complexion was just like Ali’s – a bit more of the Italian genes coming through. But Josie had been practically translucent when she was born, except for the jaundice that had temporarily yellowed her skin for a few days. She was fair and pale and probably would be her entire life. She was going to be the member of the family that they needed to worry about getting too much sun or too much summer heat. She already had a little bit of baby eczema on her elbows that Ali moisturized religiously.

Both moms were surprised at how different their two children were from each other. But then the baby would move her hands a certain way or tilt her head just so and it was like looking at baby Drew all over again. The similarities were there, they just weren’t easy to see on the surface. Josie’s anemia had finally been cured and she had a clean bill of health. And, as if her body realized it was time to take a leap forward, the little redhead started eating solid foods in early December too. She wasn’t eating real solid food yet, but the thin baby cereal from a spoon that all newborns transition to from the bottle or breast. Josie took longer to do most things than Drew had when he was her age, but some things she picked up faster than he had. Like using the spoon. She was a natural and, so far, seemed to be ambidextrous when it came to utensils. The best news of all about little Josie was that she seemed to be getting happier every day too. That was what was most important to both Ashlyn and Ali. Once her body had gotten strong and healthy enough her attitude and disposition had improved exponentially. She was still fussy but it was no longer her predominant mood.

The biggest kid development came when Sydney delivered her new, healthy, baby boy in the middle of November. Both mom and baby had come through with flying colors. Sydney was relieved that her body responded much better to the pregnancy this time and she had a much easier delivery than she had had with Cassius. She still had to have an episiotomy, those Dwyer boys just had big old heads, but it was much smaller and had healed much faster and better so the new mom was very happy with the way Dr. Comello had helped her. She and Dom asked Ali and Ashlyn to be the godparents again and Ali felt guilty for monopolizing the position of honor. Sydney was characteristically straightforward with her explanation.

“I don’t know why you’re surprised Al” she explained one afternoon in early November when Ali had stopped by with Drew for a visit on her way home from work. “You know I don’t trust anybody else with my babies. Dom’s friends are nice enough but there’s no way they’re raising my kids. I keep telling you” she paused for more emphasis, “it’s just you, Dom and my mom. You’re my family.”

Ali had cried when Sydney told her what they had decided to name their new son, James Kenneth
“Do you think Daddy K will mind that we used his name?” the coach asked from her hospital bed where she had just handed the newborn to the tearful brunette.

“Oh Syd” Ali tried to breathe through her tears. “He’s going to love it. What a sweet thing to do. I love you so much.”

They hugged, baby still in Ali’s arms, and were quiet for a few minutes after they pulled apart. Dom and Ashlyn were watching and smiling quietly from the other side of the bed.

“The James was easy” Sydney explained. “It’s Dom’s middle name and...”

“And it’s been at or near the top of your boy name list for as long as I’ve known you” Ali finished her sentence for her and grinned.

“You know it Alibaba” Sydney chuckled and admired her new baby who looked exactly like Cassius. Honestly, they could have been identical twins. “But his middle name was tough. We both wanted something more from my side of the family and, well” she paused and shrugged, “your dad was the only father I ever had and once I thought of him I couldn’t think of anything else that even came close.”

Ashlyn always felt sorry for Sydney when it came to the subject of her biological father. He had abandoned Sandi and their newborn daughter, only to come back into their lives when Sydney was three years old. He stayed for almost a year and then took off again, for good that time. Sandi and Sydney moved to Ipswich when the little girl was six years old and started over with a new life. Her father finally petitioned for a divorce when Sydney and Ali were in middle school. It turned out he had found somebody else and wanted to get married again. Sydney loved the fact that her mom had never taken his name. They had always used her maiden name, Leroux. The topic of her derelict dad was rarely discussed though. And Sydney Rae Leroux Dwyer certainly did not need anybody’s pity. But the keeper’s tender heart always ached for the gaping hole in the strong woman’s life. But then, before too much time passed, Ashlyn always remembered that Ken Krieger had been filling that hole for most of her life and it made her heart hurt less for Sydney. He had walked her down the aisle when she married Dom. He had been there a thousand times as those two girls grew up and learned what it meant to have a good man watching over them and protecting them and teaching them. James Kenneth Dwyer sounded very good to the keeper.

December rolled through like a freight train and the young family barely had time to even feel the Christmas spirit that year. Ali had been swamped with the Knight-Harris drama for the first two weeks of the month, despite not even being back at work full-time yet. January was her official full-time date and she was dreading it more than she thought she would. And Ashlyn had been trying to rehab her broken leg, stay on some sort of training diet and not lose her mind about how she was going to find the strength and desire to make another comeback. She had her walking cast removed on Wednesday, December 15th and she did indeed take Drew and Ali with her to the appointment. Drew cried when he saw the size of the saw they used to cut off his mama’s cast and both women started second-guessing the wisdom of bringing him along.

“Hey buddy” Ashlyn smiled broadly at him as Ali handed him to her. She sat him on her lap and he could feel the vibrations from the saw as it worked. “It doesn’t hurt. Look at me Drew” she instructed and waited patiently for his big brown eyes to look into hers. “it doesn’t hurt at all. I’m fine. See. Do I look like I’m in pain?”

“Nuh-uh” he shook his head slowly from side to side while Ali rubbed his back and her wife’s back at the same time.
“Do I look scared?”

“Nuh-uh.”

“That’s because I’m not. You’re helping me be very brave. Thank you big boy” she kissed the top of his head and then ruffled his thick brown hair.

The cast finally came off and, after the doctor examined her leg and turned to check the x-rays again, Ashlyn lifted her leg up so her son could see it better.

“Look at that Drew” she wrinkled her face up. “Ewww it looks so yucky, doesn’t it?”

Both she and Ali watched him carefully, curious how he would react to her pale, hairy, wrinkly, skinny leg. After he looked at it for a minute he giggled. His little body bounced up and down as he giggled and then laughed and pointed at his mama’s shriveled up leg.

“Are you laughing at my scrawny old sad-looking leg?” Ashlyn teased him, making him laugh even more. “I can’t believe you’re laughing at my poor leg” she went on dramatically.

“Mama, you silly” he chuckled again and then got quiet for a minute. “You ouchie all better?” he asked and cocked his head to the side before looking at her leg again.

“It is” she smiled at him and lifted her leg again. “Do you want to kiss it and make it extra all better for me?”

“No” he shook his head and giggled again. “Yucky.”

Both women laughed at his apt description of her leg.

“I’ll bet mommy will kiss it and make it better for me, won’t you mommy?” the keeper grinned mischievously at her wife.

Thankfully, and to Ali’s great relief, the doctor brought his attention back to them and gave Ashlyn her update and his opinion that the fracture was completely healed. He was the Breakers, Revolution and Patriots orthopedic surgeon and he had been coordinating her care and rehab with the Breakers since day one. She was cleared and given permission to do unrestricted weight-bearing activities again. She had to follow a strict schedule of rehab and follow up appointments and do lots of exercises at home in between the scheduled visits, but she was done with the casts, finally.

They attended the Knight-Harris Company holiday party that Friday night, two nights later, Noah Cross’ 6th birthday party the day after that, Saturday, and then went out to their fancy dinner and Nutcracker date the Monday of Christmas week. Two days after that, Wednesday December 22nd, they flew down to Miami to have Christmas with Deb and Mike Christopher. They were greeted with one of the nicest surprises in a very long time when the Harris crew rolled up Deb’s driveway the next afternoon. Deb and Tammye had made the arrangements and the Harrises had rented a house nearby for the Christmas weekend. Mike Harris didn’t even make a fuss about it. Kyle and Nathan were staying at Deb’s too and neither Krieger sibling could remember their mom ever being happier than she was that Christmas.

It was Christmas Eve day and everybody had gone to the beach except for Ali, Deb, Mike Christopher and Josie. Mother, daughter and granddaughter were sitting around the kiddie pool in Deb’s backyard enjoying the beautiful Miami weather that Friday morning. Josie had a cute little sun hat on with her tiny bathing suit and was slathered in sunscreen to protect her extra delicate skin. Ali and Deb sat on the ground on either side of the pool and passed a toy boat, rubber ducky and tiny beach ball back and forth in front of the 6-month old, enjoying the sweet sounds she was making as
she tried to grab whatever toy floated past her from her spot in the middle of the pool. Deb had just
gotten the lowdown on how her daughter and Ashlyn were doing and she smiled when she heard
that things were continuing to improve for the couple.

“See” Deb smiled warmly at her baby girl, “I told you to just keep trying and look what you guys
have accomplished.” The older woman couldn’t hide the emotion she was feeling. “I’m so proud of
you Alex. You’ve had a hell of a year and here you are, resilient and beautiful as ever.”

“Aw, thanks mom” the brunette smiled sweetly. “I know we’ve both thanked you for everything you
did for us this summer, but...it just doesn’t ever seem like enough” the words were heavy with
feeling as they left her lips. “I don’t think we’ll ever really be able to thank you enough, not ever...”

“Sweetheart, I keep telling you this but maybe you won’t understand until this one is older” she
nodded at Josie as the little girl splashed wildly in the pool, “and you’re spending some time with
your own grandchildren. I’ve been waiting my whole life to spend this time with you and your
family. There’s nothing that makes me happier than being with you and the kids, nothing. Mike
knows. He understands now.” Deb paused and submerged the tiny beach ball under the water for a
few seconds and then let it pop up through the surface to delight Josie and make her squeal and laugh
and clap her little hands together. “My heart has never been fuller and I should be thanking you for
letting me spend so much time with them. Not all Grandmas are as lucky as me” she smiled broadly
at her daughter as Ali squeezed the ducky and the squeak made Josie laugh again. “And if you were
trying to find something to do to thank me, even though I’ve told you there’s no need, well, bringing
everybody here for Christmas is just the best gift ever. Thank you so much honey. I love you.”

“I love you too mom.”
No Hibernating This Winter

The year 2022 started off busy and bright for both Ali and Ashlyn. In the three and a half months since Ashlyn and Drew had been in the accident, the story of the soccer goalkeeper who almost outsmarted and outjumped a speeding car had remained popular on most social media. The timing of it had been odd and it hadn’t been fully overkilled because the NWSL playoffs and then Thanksgiving and then Christmas had come one right after the other so the story never quite got its’ moment in the spotlight. Neither Ashlyn nor Ali had pursued any attention from it and had no plans to try and use it to their advantage in any way. The thought never even crossed Ali’s mind, which was surprising to her when the people from the Ellen show called her and asked to have Ashlyn come and do the show again that winter. Between the crazy car accident and the unorthodox but refreshing way Knight-Harris had conducted the Kamala Pierce situation in December there were lots of things they wanted to talk with Ashlyn about. Ali and the keeper discussed it at length and both agreed that Ashlyn should do the show. She’d be crazy not to. That kind of publicity just didn’t come knocking on your door very often. But Ashlyn was adamant that Hilary should appear with her, just like last time.

As it turned out, Ashlyn travelled to Los Angeles twice that winter. The first trip was to host the NWSL draft again, this time her co-host was superstar Alex Morgan. Morgan and her husband had moved back to the west coast once the LA Strikers had been established and the talented forward was very happy to be playing in front of her home crowd, finally. It was, arguably, the best draft show the league had ever put on and both Ashlyn and Alex were terrific. They knew each other from years of playing against each other in the NWSL and from hanging out with Tobin Heath, in particular when Alex still played with the Thorns. They had many good friends in common and had always gotten along well. Even on the pitch their interactions had always been tough and challenging but respectful and good-natured. Alex Morgan had a reputation for bowling over goalkeepers, more so on the international stage than in the NWSL, and she and Ashlyn had had their own spectacular collision once. It was one of the fans’ favorite videos on YouTube, still, even five years later. Alex had landed flat on her back and seemed to have the wind knocked out of her. Ashlyn walked over to check on her, bent over and sweetly wiped some of the artificial turf pellets off of her sweaty forehead before helping her back to her feet. It was just such an Ashlyn thing to do. As long as the keeper felt like you were just doing your job and not playing dirty or trying to hurt anybody, she had no hard feelings when things got rough on the pitch. That was a perfect example.

Ashlyn, even with her new, short haircut, was as popular with the players and fans as ever and the NWSL and Lifetime TV both continued to take notice. The keeper was already on the Breakers’ disabled list to start the 2022 season so the NWSL knew they weren’t going to have her, even splitting starts with Abby Smith, until June or July at the earliest. Her rehab wasn’t going well and her timeline for return had been pushed back. Lifetime TV took advantage and hired her to do an in-depth interview with a player from each of the two Games of the Week. The network was starting, this season, to broadcast a Sunday afternoon game as well as the Saturday afternoon game. They wanted her to film them a couple of weeks in advance so that the interviews could be edited and ready for game day. The keeper would start with a couple of phone conversations with the players and then travel to their home stadium and film the interview. As they had done successfully in the past, Ashlyn would accompany the player on an excursion in their team’s home town to get to see, and share with the fans, another side to the players in the NWSL. Ashlyn loved doing these interviews and she was thrilled to be doing them again. Not to mention getting paid well for them.

Her second trip to Los Angeles was in early February to tape the Ellen show. Ashlyn had gotten her wish and Hilary joined her again. Ellen talked with them about their own personal successes in the four and a half years it had been since their last appearance. They were happy to discuss the way
both of their professional leagues had grown during that time. And then they got to the messy Kamala Pierce/Christian Agnew story.

“We don’t even like to use his name” Ashlyn explained passionately as they dove into the hot topic. “I don’t want people to know his name, except for future employers so nobody gets fooled like we did. I want people to know what a great person Kamala Pierce is. That’s the real story here.”

“Is she still represented by your firm?” Ellen asked, seriously.

“She is” Hilary answered with a smile. “She’s doing great too. Just watch for her to have a breakout season this year. She was a rookie last season, and I think it’s obvious, under a lot of extra pressure that she shouldn’t have been. I can’t wait to watch her fly this year now that she’s got an agent who’s supporting her and helping her be her best self.”

“You guys really live by this idea that your company is here to help the athletes succeed and achieve their goals, don’t you?” the host asked with a surprised smile. “I mean, most agencies are all about the money and they keep the clients happy so they can all make money, themselves and the clients. But you guys seem to be coming at it from a different angle.”

“Well, we are” Ashlyn shrugged and grinned. “We’re coming at it from a woman’s angle.”

The audience erupted in cheers. They spent a long time talking about empowering women, especially young women just starting their professional careers, and promoting women’s issues in all areas, not just specific to sports. Then they spent the end of the interview discussing the freak car accident that almost killed Ashlyn and her young son. Ashlyn was passionate and humble and open as usual and it was a very poignant segment of the interview. Ellen brought up the interview the keeper had done with Heather O’Reilly about her wife’s close call during their daughter’s delivery as well as Ashlyn’s call to remove the stigma about talking about mental health.

“Damn girl” Ellen’s eyes went wide after discussing all of that. “You had yourself a busy year!”

“You know what’s probably still bothering her though” Hilary quirked an eyebrow at her friend. “The Breakers didn’t make the playoffs. They missed by one point and it eats her alive when she thinks about it.”

“Is that true? Is that what sticks in your craw most about last year?”

“Well, aside from my family’s health, yeah” she admitted and blushed. “What can I say? I’m competitive” she grinned and her dimple popped out.

That led them into some heated competition playing several of Ellen’s games to the delight of the studio audience. It was hysterical and Ellen could barely breathe she was laughing so hard at the two professional athletes trying to crush each other in every single game. Of course the keeper was careful on her freshly healed right leg. The episode aired at the end of February with a special add-on at the end where Ashlyn spoke directly to the camera and urged anybody who needed or wanted to talk about mental health to reach out. There was information for her newly formed mental health awareness group as well, the Mental Health Initiative.

The biggest news of all for Ashlyn came at the end of January from Nike. They were looking for athletes and celebrities who were a little edgier than what they had always used in their past campaigns. They loved Ashlyn’s new look and thought it would work perfectly for what they were trying to do. They would be doing a big photo shoot in NYC at the end of February and the deal was going to be the biggest of her whole career. And it was all because she had cut her stupid hair. She would never get over that. She had lost some of her smaller endorsements because of her new look,
but this huge Nike deal made everything else irrelevant. Except for the fact that she couldn’t play soccer right at the moment, things had never been better for Ashlyn’s earning potential.

Ali had gone back to work full-time when they got home from Florida the first week of January. She was ready, as much as she missed her baby girl. The furor over Christian Agnew died down somewhat in January but then picked up again when Hilary and Ashlyn showed up on everybody’s tv screen the last week of February talking about it again on the Ellen show. But Ali and her team handled everything as well as could be expected. The good news was that several agents came looking to see if Knight-Harris was hiring. They all said basically the same thing. They loved the message K-H was sending and they had been hoping to work for a company like K-H their entire careers. Ali replaced the dirtbag agent with two new hires who specialized in the WNBA and NBA, and then she hired three more agents. She was expecting an uptick in clients to go along with the good vibes they were getting from many of the agents out there. With her new hires she would be ready to take care of anybody who decided to join them.

The other big accomplishment for the brunette that winter was her deal with Whitney Flanagan (nee Engen). Ali hadn’t forgotten her idea to find a way to help pay for Whitney’s law school so she would be able to come and work with K-H once she was officially a lawyer. Ali met the law student a few times in Cambridge so they could talk about it before she actually jumped through any hoops to try and make it happen. She didn’t even know if Whitney was interested.

“So what do you think?” she asked cautiously, trying to read Whitney’s placid and pretty face.

“Wow Al, I don’t know what to say.”

“Well there’s no pressure. I mean, besides the fact that I think it’s one of the best ideas I’ve ever had and we both really want you to say yes” Ali spoke quickly because she was excited and nervous. “But, seriously, only if it’s something you want to do.”

“So how would it work, exactly?”

“You’re scheduled to get your degree next February, a year from now. Instead of working your 20 hours a week on your professor’s research or in the law library, you work for Knight-Harris’ legal department. Which barely exists right now, but that’s what I want to change. It would be a paid internship from our end of things. We would pay you to help with the legal stuff we have going on, not a lot but definitely more than what you’re making now. And we would buy all of your books and anything you would need like that for our own ‘law library’. I know it’s not as good as actually paying your tuition for you but...”

“Al, that’s an amazing offer. The books alone are ridiculously expensive and they don’t let you live in the library so you have to buy a lot of them. Are you sure this is something you guys want to do? Because I’d have a hard time saying no.”

“Whitney, I want to be crystal clear with you because I don’t know exactly what Ash has told you and I don’t want there to be any confusion or misunderstandings about any of this.” She took a breath, never taking her eyes off of the law student. “I want you to create and manage Knight-Harris’ legal department. We’re outsourcing all of our legal work now and it’s a huge financial drain for us. I know we’re not a big, fancy law firm but you know the kind of work we’re doing. Yeah, a lot of it is wining and dining potential clients and their families. That type of thing is always going to be a big part of our world. Most of our legal needs are contract-based but it doesn’t always have to be like that. If you hate contracts you can hire somebody to do that and focus on something else that you love more. I want you and your big brain to help us grow this company and make it better and stronger so it can help more people. I’d like to be able to help these young athletes learn how to handle their money and their finances, for example.”
“Ok, so you’ve put some thought into this I see” Whitney chuckled.

“I want you to be our fifth shareholder too.”

“Wow. Geez Al, I mean, damn” the law student’s face was covered with excitement and she was flattered by the high praise and the tremendous offer.

“It’s a lot to take in, I get that” the brunette smiled warmly at her. “Take a few days and think about it. No hard feelings either way. No obligations. But if you say yes, I want you to mean it. I don’t want to have to worry about losing you to some big firm in a year or two years. Whatever you’re looking for from them I want you to find a way to make that happen here with Knight-Harris.”

It only took Whitney two days to say yes to all of it, and the second day was only because Ryan was out of town and she wanted to talk with him about it too. The Flanagans were staying at the big old house for the months of January and February that year. The sublet on their awesome house in Cambridge was up at the end of December and they couldn’t get the new condo they bought in Arlington finalized until March 1st. They put almost everything they owned into storage for two months and moved into the front bedroom at #6 Beach Road. It was Ryan’s off-season and he was doing all sorts of private training sessions for extra money, as he had been doing for the past two years. Whitney spent most of her time on campus in Cambridge, including a couple of evenings each week. It was wonderful having them back in the house again. It was hard to tell who was happiest about it, but most of them thought it was the dogs.

Meg came up to stay for her February vacation again the third week of the month and, thankfully, Ashlyn was home that week. The bad news was that Josie started teething at the beginning of February and got her bottom two incisors a week apart. The normally fussy baby was practically inconsolable for the first two weeks of the month and they all suffered. She achieved another huge milestone that month as well. Before the end of the month Josie had started crawling and was eager to explore everything the big old house had to offer. Her new freedom made the 8-month old baby girl happier than she had ever been.

When Ashlyn finally came home the last weekend in February from her many travels and adventures she was tired and cranky. She missed her wife and her kids and her dogs and her house. The three-day Nike photo shoot in NYC had been amazing and she had spent time with Kyle and Nathan and some of their friends and had just been the belle of the ball, except Ashlyn style – without the ballgown and glass slipper. She had never felt so famous or important. But the keeper was glad to be home. Whitney and Ryan were in Long Island visiting his family for the weekend and getting ready to move into their new condo the following week. Ali and Ashlyn had finally been able to have sex during the kids’ afternoon nap time the day after the keeper came home.

“Damn woman” Ashlyn panted out, breathing hard as she came down from her orgasm. Ali crawled up her body and loosened the restraints so the keeper could slip her wrists out of them. Ashlyn leaned over and took her wife’s breast in her mouth again as the brunette worked on the satin fabric.

“Hey” she chuckled, surprised by the contact.

Ali settled onto her keeper’s lap and rubbed her arms for her to help get the blood flowing in them again. Ashlyn sat up and brought their lips together in a soft, slow kiss that made Ali’s chest tingle.

“I love you” the keeper mumbled against her wife’s soft lips.

Ali pulled her closer, her arms around her back, and kissed her again. Ashlyn settled her hands on the brunette’s ass and softly scratched at the skin there.
“I love you too” Ali breathed out as she leaned her forehead against the blonde’s.

“I still can’t believe you tied me up” Ashlyn shook her head and smiled seductively at her wife.

“I warned you” Ali smirked as she played with the short hair at the back of her keeper’s neck.

“That you did” Ashlyn chuckled and moved her lips to the brunette’s neck for one last kiss before leaning back against the pillows and headboard again with a satisfied sigh.

“I missed you so much babe” the brunette moved her right hand down her wife’s left side, her fingertips tracing the beautiful and colorful tattoo there. “I’m so glad you’re home.”

“Me too baby” the keeper smiled and rubbed Ali’s thighs, still straddling her hips.

They stayed like that for several minutes, Ali taking her time and finishing the tracing of Ashlyn’s entire side tattoo while the keeper massaged her thighs and admired the view in front of her. They both wanted more but knew there wouldn’t be enough time before Josie was up from her shorter nap. Ali lay down on Ashlyn’s chest, kissing her lips on her way down. They both loved the way their breasts felt pressed together. They caressed each other’s skin softly and gently as they let the quiet of the room calm their desire down.

“Can I tell you something?” the keeper’s voice was so quiet Ali could barely hear it only a few inches away.

“Always” she replied but didn’t move or look at her wife.

It took a few minutes before Ashlyn spoke again and Ali could feel her wife’s heart rate increase underneath her.

“I don’t think I want to come back” she paused, and instantly wished the words had never left her mouth. Once they were out, they were out and she would have to deal with them. She had avoided saying them for two months now as she grew more and more sure of it. “To the team, I mean.”

Ali knew this was a big deal and wanted to be careful to respond as a wife and not an agent. She had made that mistake more than once before. The brunette noticed that Ashlyn’s heart rate had slowed way down once she had made her statement. Her whole body seemed to relax.

“Ok, it’s your decision babe. You know I’ll support you whatever you decide, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you have another team in mind?” Ali still hadn’t moved or looked at her keeper yet. “We could move to Orlando for a couple of years maybe. They could definitely use a good keeper.”

“No, I don’t mean another team” Ashlyn sighed, momentarily frustrated. “I mean I don’t want to come back. At all.”

Ali sat back up, straddling her wife again, and studied her face as she took both of her keeper’s hands in her own.

“You’ve been thinking about this a lot, haven’t you?” she asked quietly after a minute and brought one of Ashlyn’s hands up to her lips and started slowly kissing her knuckles, one at a time.

“I have.” Ashlyn swallowed and smiled shyly at her beautiful brunette who was still watching her closely. “You’re not mad at me?”
“No, of course not” Ali frowned around the knuckle at her lips. “Why would I be mad at you sweetheart?”

“I don’t know” the keeper shrugged and a relieved grin graced her face.

“Ashlyn I want you to be happy. If playing another year or two makes you happy then that’s what I want you to do. We’ll go with you wherever you go, if you want to keep playing. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, Al, but I don’t want to keep playing. I think I’m done.”

Ali watched as her wife’s face grinned back at her again. There didn’t seem to be any hesitation or indecision anywhere in Ashlyn’s body. The brunette had dreaded this day for years, expecting it to be one of the most difficult things she would have to help her wife face. But now that Ashlyn was actually saying the words out loud, she seemed remarkably at peace. She looked happy and relieved and excited.

“Ok babe” she smiled adoringly at the blonde and lay back down on her chest again. “I’m proud of you and I love you.”

“That’s it?” Ashlyn craned her neck to try and see her wife’s face but failed. “What? Is this some reverse psychology bullshit or something?” she demanded, getting upset.

“No way honey” Ali shook her head and leaned up to kiss Ashlyn’s jaw. “I can tell you’ve put a lot of thought into this and, if I were guessing, I’d guess you’ve been trying to tell me this for about a month now.”

“Two” the keeper corrected and wrapped her arms around her wife’s back, hugging her close. “So you’re ok if I don’t play anymore? Really?”

“Ash, it really doesn’t matter what I think. It’s your career and your body and you’re the one who has to do all the work. I’m not blind though” she continued, her voice calm and level but still full of love. “I’ve seen you struggle the past year or so, trying to get yourself ready for trainings and games. Your back spasms, your hip bursitis, your broken ribs, your dislocated elbow, your sprained fingers and wrists, your shoulder repair, your broken leg, your concussions...and that’s just off the top of my head from the past five years. You’re a fucking warrior and if you say it’s time to hang up your boots, then it’s time to hang em up.”

“It’s time. I just don’t have it in me anymore” she shook her head and looked down sadly. “This rehab, I can’t fucking do it. I don’t want to fucking do it. I don’t want to work my ass off to get back to where I was, or as close as possible, only to sit on the fucking bench. And that’s all anybody will give me now – a spot on the bench for emergencies only. Fuck that shit.”

Ali let Ashlyn’s anger simmer for a few minutes and when she felt it start to dissipate she leaned up and kissed her jaw again.

“What else?” the brunette asked softly. “Tell me another reason.”

The keeper sighed and paused as she thought hard about whether she wanted to tell Ali everything all at once or not. She had been thinking a lot about her future ever since the accident five and a half months ago but Ali would be getting it all with no warning.

“I don’t want to travel anymore, or not nearly as much anyway. I’m tired of leaving you and the kids. I hate it.”
“I hate that too” Ali agreed. “It’ll be so nice to have you home more often. I can’t wait” she giggled softly. She could tell there was something else but Ashlyn seemed shy or nervous about telling her. “What else?”

The keeper was quiet for a couple of minutes, deep in thought while her hands roamed around Ali’s strong back. Fuck it. She was just going to tell her.

“I want to have a baby.”

“What?” Ali sat up again and met her wife’s determined gaze. They looked at each other for a full minute without moving or talking or blinking. “Tell me babe” the brunette finally asked, her voice genuine and sincere as she waited on pins and needles for her love to explain.

“I...there’s nothing to tell” she shrugged again. “I want to get pregnant and have a baby. Our baby.” She paused and watched Ali’s eyes study her again. “Would that be ok? I mean, do you want to have another baby?”

Ali could see that her wife was serious and, surprisingly, not nervous about either of these big, life bombs she had just dropped. She still looked calm and almost serene as she confessed these secret wants to her wife. Part of Ali’s struggles after Josie had been born had been coming to terms with the fact that she couldn’t, or shouldn’t if she wanted to survive, have any more children. Although her uterus had been repaired and she technically could, theoretically anyway, get pregnant, it was a deathwish for the baby and probably herself as well. It had been another issue she had dealt with on her own and by working with Mattie last year. Ali knew that Ashlyn wanted a big family and she did too, if she was being honest with herself. The keeper had always wanted four kids, two girls and two boys, so everybody would have a brother and a sister. They had never quantified what ‘big family’ meant, but she knew it meant more than two kids. Two kids was wonderful and she was more than grateful and would be perfectly content with their beautiful family just as it was, of course. She knew Ashlyn had gone back and forth over the years trying to decide if she wanted to be pregnant and have a baby or not. The brunette had assumed that, after Sydney’s miscarriage and Ali’s close call with Josie, her wife’s opinion would have swung back permanently to the ‘no thank you’ on carrying and delivering a baby.

“I’d love for us to have another baby Ash, are you sure?”

“I’m positive” she nodded emphatically. “I’ve been afraid of doing it all my life and then I started talking myself into it and then out of it again. I got scared when Syd lost her baby and then your experience last summer made me really question it again.”

“And you still want to?”

“I do” she smiled confidently at her wife. “I really do. As scared as I’ve been over the last few things that have been challenging or flat out terrifying, I want to do it. I want to know what it feels like to bring a life into this world, and to feel our baby inside me, growing and becoming the next little Krieger. I was jealous of you breastfeeding Drew, not in a creepy way, just...I don’t know. I just want to share that connection with one of our babies. It scares me but I can’t think of anything more important a person can do than give birth to another human being. Creating a life and nurturing it. It’s amazing. But only if you really want to have a third baby. If you don’t...if you think two is enough, I’d understand. I’d be disappointed, but I’d understand.”

Ali got off of her wife’s lap and lay down sideways with her head resting on Ashlyn’s stomach so she was looking up at the gorgeous blonde.

“Don’t tease me now Ashlyn” she warned as she held her wife’s hand and felt her keeper start
stroking her hair with her free hand. “I’ve been hoping and dreaming about having a baby with your cute dimple and your beautiful everything for so long...please don’t tease me.”

“I’m serious Ali. About all of it. I don’t know if the universe is trying to tell me it’s time to quit and that’s why my leg got broken in that freak car accident or what. But after last year I just don’t want to wait too long for anything anymore. Life’s too fucking short.”

They were both quiet again as their hands travelled over each other’s skin.

“When would you get pregnant?” the brunette’s voice was soft and her lips curled up in the corners even though she tried to contain her mounting excitement.

“I think having the baby in June is the best because your mom, hopefully, would come up to help us again” she began telling her wife the plans she’d been formulating in her head for two months. “So that would mean I would be pregnant in early October. So we should start trying in August or September in case the first couple don’t work.”

“This year?!” Ali couldn’t keep the surprise from her voice or the shocked look from her face.

“We want them close together in age, right?” Ashlyn shrugged again. “Josie will be two when the baby is born next summer. Just like Drew was when she was born. It’s kind of perfect.”

“You really have thought this all through” Ali smiled and giggled softly. “Are we really going to do this?!” excitement filled her voice and she rolled onto her back, her head still on her wife’s stomach and a broad smile across her face. “We’d have a 4 year-old, a 2 year-old and a newborn...God help us.”

Ashlyn sat up, bent over and kissed her wife, both women grinning into the kiss and then giggling excitedly. There were so many things to talk about and Ali had a million questions. She was two months behind her wife in the planning process and eager to catch up. But Josie was awake and Drew would be up from his nap in another 30 minutes. They would have to pick up their conversation after they put the kids to bed that night. Ashlyn bent over and kissed her wife’s lips again, caressing the top of her head with her right hand and one of her breasts with the other.

“I love you.”

“I love you too babe.”

They dressed quickly and Ashlyn changed Josie’s diaper and brought her downstairs for her bottle. Ali handed it to her, already warmed up, as the keeper got to the bottom of the backstairs.

“Beach or park?” the brunette asked as she went back to the counter to cut up apple and cheese slices for Drew’s snack.

They loved to get the kids outside after their afternoon naps for a little while before dinnertime and then bathtime and the whole bedtime routine. It wasn’t getting dark until 5:30pm those days so it worked out well for them, as long as it wasn’t too cold outside.

“Beach” the blonde replied as she crossed the kitchen towards the mudroom and then the living room. She knew that when she travelled it was hard for Ali to get both kids and the dogs out on an excursion and the dogs often got the short end of the stick. “We can let the dogs run around too.”

“Sounds like a plan” Ali called out after her and kept slicing, eating more than a few pieces as she worked.
When she was finished with that she went to the mudroom and made sure the kids’ coats, hats, and mittens were ready to go. It was February on the ocean in New England and it was only about 45 degrees outside. Ali made sure the dogs’ leashes, with poop bags attached, were hanging on their hooks and then peeked into the living room to check on her baby girl.

“Hi little one” she cooed as she bent over and kissed Josie on her head. “Did you have a good nap?” she asked and then smiled as she watched her daughter’s face shift between concentrating on the bottle in her mouth and smiling up at her mommy.

“She had a big, poopy diaper” Ashlyn added with her own big smile. “Didn’t you, stinky pants?” she made Josie giggle around the bottle. “Such a good girl.”

Persey wagged her tail from her spot next to Ashlyn, used to hearing those same words spoken to her. She had developed a special affinity for Josie and always tried to be near her whenever the baby was awake and around. The brindled dog had her neck and head stretched out on Ashlyn’s lap so her long nose was pressed up against Josie’s side as Ashlyn held her. Fred was the patient one when it came to Drew, tolerating most of his rambunctious actions. Persey kept a discreet distance, wary of the stray blocks and balls and toys that often flew out of the toddler’s hands. It would be interesting to see how close Persey stayed to Josie once she became more active and started throwing things too.

Ali smiled at the cute scene and went back to the kitchen to bring Drew’s snack plate and sippy cup into the living room. She placed them on the coffee table, warned Fred to leave it alone, and handed her wife a bottle of water.

“I cut up extra for you but don’t eat them all” she tousled Ashlyn’s hair as she walked by her. “Save some for the boy.”

Before the brunette had made it through the mudroom they both heard the distinctive sound of their son’s small heels hitting the floor directly above the living room. Ashlyn looked up at the ceiling with a grin.

“Oh hi” she looked down at Josie with another smile. “Your brother’s awake. Are we gonna have a fun time with Drew?”

Josie waved her arms around, excited. She always responded to her brother and usually even just hearing his name would get her going.

“Ok, just relax until you finish your bottle little one” Ashlyn soothed her. “Gotta eat it all up now.”

A few minutes later Ali appeared from the doorway by the front stairs with a sleepy and snuggly Drew in her arms. His thick, brown hair was sticking up in several places and his face was pink and creased from where he had pressed it against his pillow. Ali sat down as close to Ashlyn and Josie as she could without making Persey move. The keeper reached over and gently rubbed Drew’s cheek and then patted his sweaty back as they settled into the couch for a minute.

“Do you want your juice sweet boy?” Ali asked him quietly and kissed his forehead as he nuzzled into her neck.

He nodded his head and reached a pudgy hand out to take the sippy cup from the brunette. He sat back more against her front and took a couple of big drinks as he slowly surveyed the room.

“Why didn’t he have a shirt on?” Ali asked her wife with a small chuckle.

“Oh, yeah” Ashlyn nodded. “It was wet when I went to put him down so I took it off and then he wouldn’t let me put another one on him so...” she shrugged her shoulders and gave the brunette an
apologetic smile.

They had learned the hard way not to fuss with him too much when it was nap time. He got worked up and then wouldn’t go to sleep and then was a holy terror for the rest of the afternoon and evening. He wasn’t spoiled. But if he fought Ashlyn’s attempt at putting a clean and dry shirt on him she had done the right thing by just letting him nap topless. It just wasn’t the time to strictly enforce any non-essential rules.

“Why was it wet?” Ali asked and tried to think back to lunch time and immediately after to see if she could figure out the answer.

“It smelled and felt like water” the keeper replied as she lifted Josie up to burp her. Every parent had to have a good sense of smell and fearless investigative skills if they had any hope of figuring out what substance was on their child or their child’s clothes or sometimes even the furniture. “He must have gotten into the dogs’ water bowl again.”

“Better than the toilet I guess” Ali chuckled and they shared a knowing look.

They sat there together for another fifteen minutes as Drew eventually slid off of Ali’s lap and stood between her legs to eat his slices of cheese and apples. He kept one hand on his mommy’s knee, patting it absent-mindedly as he enjoyed his snack with the other hand. Ashlyn asked him for a few pieces and he took his time and carefully handed her one slice at a time. Josie, who was sitting on the keeper’s lap watching closely, reached for every piece that her mama popped into her mouth. She made a frustrated face every time she didn’t get a piece but was eager to try again the very next minute. She was just starting to eat finger foods but neither apples nor cheese were on her list of acceptable foods yet.

“Aww, don’t tease her” Ali objected lightly.

Ashlyn took a tiny piece of apple and smushed it between her fingers, making sure there was no skin on it, and then let Josie pick it up from the palm of her hand.

“Good girl Josie” she praised.

They watched the little redhead clap her hands as she gummed the softened piece of apple. Ashlyn looked at her wife and beamed at the beautiful brunette. Ali met her gaze and smiled back, cocking her head to the side just a little as she tried to figure out what had made her keeper so happy in that moment. Ashlyn reached her hand over and rubbed the top of her wife’s shoulder, working her hand behind her neck and pulling her closer so they could share a kiss. Ali stole an extra one as they pulled apart and squeezed her keeper’s hand.

“What’s gotten into you?” she asked softly as both Drew and Josie continued snacking and observing, oblivious to the heart eyes their moms were making at each other.

“We’re going to have another baby” Ashlyn grinned and her dimple appeared. “And I’m so happy.”
Ashlyn and Ali had agreed to keep their baby plans to themselves, exclusively, for at least a couple of weeks so they could let everything settle. Ashlyn loved how excited and enthusiastic her wife was but she was careful to give her enough time to process everything else too. She had learned that Ali’s mind worked differently than hers did and the brunette spent twice as much time thinking about things as she did. It wasn’t because of different intelligence levels or brain capacity, it was simply because Ali thought through everything. She processed future possibilities and started to work out potential solutions to situations that Ashlyn’s brain hadn’t even considered yet. It’s what made the brunette good at every job she had ever had. And it’s what helped their home and family life hum along peacefully, for the most part. In this case, Ashlyn wanted to make sure to give her wife time to let her brain do what it did. They agreed, after two weeks, that they would tell their besties the following weekend at James Dwyer’s christening celebration. They would have had a hard time not telling Niki and Molly too but the couple wasn’t there. They were at home with their two-week old baby girl, Penny. Mom and daughter were both happy and healthy and everybody was excited about having a baby girl in the family. Even Penny’s two big brothers.

Much like Josie, James was fussier than his big brother had been. He wasn’t as bad as Josie had been but he was nowhere near as good as Cassius and Drew had been either. At four months old he still looked exactly like Cash. If not for the four-year age difference, they could have been twins. They were beautiful boys and their faces were an interesting blend of both parents. Cash wasn’t wild about having a little brother. It was a big adjustment for him and still very much a work in progress. Sydney told her best friend that having them closer in age had been smart. She thought it must be easier for a two-year old to adjust than an old coot of a four-year old. From Cash’s point of view, James was just something that he had to share his parents with. There wasn’t much in it for the older boy. Both parents told him that once James was bigger they would be able to play together and always be best mates.

The christening had been lovely and Cash had practically stolen the show in his dapper little suit and tie. Ashlyn kept threatening his parents that she was going to take him home with her and never give him back. The christening and baptism was at Sydney’s old church in Ipswich and then there was a party afterwards at Sandy’s house, just like they had done with Cash. The only difference with James’ christening was that Ashlyn held the baby this time instead of Ali and Ken Krieger, with tears in his eyes, held Drew in his arms to keep him from running up to be with his moms.

“She said what?!” Sydney whisper-yelled and pulled Ali into her childhood bedroom where everybody’s coats had been tossed onto the bed.

“You heard me” Ali grinned with wide eyes. “Retiring and having a baby. My wife, the badass.”

“Holy shit!”

“I know!”

They were both excited and giggling as they clutched at each other’s hands and tried to be quiet.

“Wow” the coach sighed and smiled. “I’m pretty sure I know, but how do we feel about this?”

“Oh Syd, I’m sad and pissed off about her retiring but I’m not telling her that. If she’s ok with it there’s no sense in me making her upset about it. I’m just so mad at...everything that’s happened to her in her career. It’s just her fucking luck that a freak car accident ends her fucking career. I mean, really?” she quirked an eyebrow.
“Yeah, that sucks” Sydney agreed. “I thought she had at least two or three more years left. I mean, she still made all the saves. Her game never fell off or anything.”

“When she first told me about it I thought she meant she wanted to go to a new team so I told her we could go to Orlando for a couple of years. I never dreamt she meant not come back at all.” Ali took a deep breath and then confided in her oldest and closest confidant. “But it’s been hard for her, even before the accident. She had to work harder each off-season and when they had breaks she had to train like they were in-season or she’d have a hell of a time getting fit again after the break. She’ll be 37 at the end of this season.”

“That’s old for professional soccer players, even goalkeepers” Sydney agreed with a nod.

“I’m glad it’s kind of on her terms” Ali continued, keeping her voice low. “She knows she could gut it out and do the rehab and get back into playing shape for at least the second half of the season, but why? So she can sit on the bench and help train their next goalkeeper again?” A flash of anger crossed the brunette’s face. “She did that once and Abby Smith took her fucking job.”

“So she’s not interested in being the leader in the locker room and head cheerleader on the bench” the coach shrugged her shoulders. “I can respect that. Some players can do that and some can’t.”

“I don’t know if I could do it” Ali pondered the situation. “I think I could though and I might do it too, just to be around the team for another season. I can tell you from personal experience, you miss that when it’s gone.”

“So what’s she going to do after she retires? Like, after she has the baby, what’s next?”

“She has a lot of ideas, good ones too” Ali replied. “The obvious ones are goalkeeper coach and broadcaster. She’d be great at both and I think she’d enjoy both.”

“She’s done so well with her other gigs on tv. She’s a natural in front of the camera. And those Lifetime TV interview shows she’s doing this season are going to be awesome” Sydney enthused.

“I know she doesn’t want to travel much anymore. She hates being away so much. I hate it too, but I’ve never held that over her head or anything. She was so at peace with it when she told me. I’ve honestly never been more surprised in my life...except when she said she wanted to get pregnant!”
“I thought she didn’t want to carry a baby?” Sydney asked, frowning in confusion.

“She’s changed her mind a lot over the years” Ali admitted. “She’s had some scary things happen around her…”

“But she’s had way more normal pregnancy things happen around her though” the coach challenged. “Molly was fine with all three of her pregnancies. Beth was too with both of hers. And I’ve had two good ones and you had one. That’s…eight good ones to two bad ones, and that’s just in her inner circle.”

“Well maybe that’s what changed her mind” Ali offered with a shrug. “I really don’t know. All I know is she’s been thinking about it a lot. She told me a couple of months but I think she re-thought everything in her life after last summer. I know I did.”

Downstairs, Whitney and Ryan were about to go out to the garage and join in the fun with soccer, foot, and basket balls and several various sized children. Ken, Koty and Dom were out there with Abby and Alex, Sydney’s friends from school, but there could never be too many grown-ups trying to keep everybody safe and happy.

“Hey Whit, can I talk to you for a minute?” Ashlyn caught her best friend just as they opened the garage door.

“Hey hon” the law student squeezed her husband’s arm. “I’ll be out in a few minutes, ok?”

Ryan smiled and kissed her quickly on the lips before closing the door to the garage behind him. Whitney and Ashlyn heard an uproar from the garage. All the kids loved Uncle Ryan because he was so insanely tall. The fact that he was nice and played pretty much whatever game any of them wanted whenever they wanted was probably part of his appeal too.

“What’s up?”

Ashlyn pulled her towards a quiet corner of the kitchen, away from the ever-popular refrigerator and kitchen sink. They huddled up and spoke with their voices low and excited for almost thirty minutes as Ashlyn explained her two big life decisions.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner” she looked down at the floor as guilt flooded her system. “But I had to figure this one out on my own… I didn’t even tell Ali until a couple of weeks ago.”

“Ash, hey” Whitney squeezed her arm to get the keeper to look up at her. “It’s ok. I get it. That’s some high-level decision making going on and sometimes you have to figure it all out on your own first. I know I did anyway.”

“Like when?”

“When I decided to retire. I figured it all out for myself before I told you because I didn’t want to let you sway me one way or the other. Because I value your opinion so much, I was afraid I’d let it cloud my own vision of retiring and going to law school. You know?”

“Exactly! I wanted to talk to you about it so bad but I knew I had to be sure myself, first.”

“I’m glad Ali took it well, but I’m not surprised” Whitney smiled. “I’m glad things are back to wonderful with you two again. What a difference six months makes huh?”

“Last year seems like a dream and sometimes I think it was just too crazy to have actually happened. But then I pick up Josie or look down at the scar on my leg or hear Drew talk about the crash every
once in a while and it’s the realest thing that ever happened.” Ashlyn took a deep breath and let it out again. “And I really think that’s a big part of my decision. Life’s too fucking short. I’ve had a great run in the NWSL. We won some championships, we won some shields, we won some awards. Is it the way I thought it was going to end? Hell no. But it feels right. I know when the games start next month I’ll miss it like crazy. I’m already feeling the itch with training camp starting last week. But I’m having a hard enough time getting this leg back to just working like a normal leg, forget about a professional athlete’s leg.”

“I’ve been there” Whitney laughed softly. “Can I tell you something?”

“Dirty truth?”

“Always” Whitney looked her best friend in the eye and saw excitement and a little bit of fear there too. “It’s hard. I mean, really fucking hard” she admitted quietly and made herself keep looking into Ashlyn’s eyes. “Maybe I made it harder on myself by doing such a solitary thing right afterwards, I don’t know. Maybe you’ll have a better time because you have two adorable kids to fill up your extra time instead of law books and stuffy, silent libraries. I sure hope so.”

Ashlyn hugged her bestie, knowing how hard she had struggled to get through her first NWSL season as a law student. They had talked about it several times. Ashlyn had been there for her friend and finally, for the first time ever in their relationship, felt like she had stepped up for Whitney at a difficult time like she had done for the keeper so many times already in their friendship.

“I know it’s hard. I watched somebody awesome go through it and I’m hoping she’ll be able to help me again too.”

They hugged again and then Whitney’s curiosity took over.

“So what are you going to do? You’ve talked about so many things you wanted to do ‘after soccer’ and here it is...after soccer.”

“Oh man, my head is swimming with ideas. It’s overwhelming to be honest” she admitted with a sheepish look. “I know I’ve always talked about being a keeper coach somewhere. I’ve dreamed about being the keeper coach back at UNC more than I should probably admit” she chuckled. “But I don’t want to move away. This is home and I don’t want to travel any more than I have to. I’m tired of missing my family.”

Whitney nodded her head encouragingly.

“And I think I can do the broadcasting or analyst thing. I mean, people call me about it and offer me gigs” she dropped her eyes modestly. “The women’s world cup is next year and I’m pretty sure they’re going to ask me to do it again.”

“But won’t you be pregnant next year? Have you thought about waiting a year to have the baby?”

“The Olympics are the year after the world cup. So I’d have to wait two years, realistically. And I don’t want to wait anymore. Life is too short my friend” she repeated, enunciating each word slowly and carefully.

“Alright alright, I got it” Whitney laughed, glad to see her friend so happy and optimistic. “And you are awesome at the broadcasting and analyst thing Ash. Don’t be so humble. You rock at that and you know it.” She grinned and pushed her friend playfully, making her giggle and blush a little. “So you don’t do the world cup broadcast next summer. That’s ok too.”

“It’s just too hard to say. Once I get pregnant, obviously, we’ll know better and can plan more” she
explained. “I may not get pregnant until November or December for all we know.”

“How are you guys going to do it? Have you decided yet?”

“Probably IUI like Ali did last time. It just gives us a better shot because the swimmers are that much closer to the egg. Hopefully I’ll be as fertile as she was” she chuckled.

“Ok so besides being the hot, smart soccer analyst for the major tournaments, what else have you got up your sleeve?” Whitney asked.

“Well the mental health thing is just getting started, but I’d like to focus on that somehow for sure. I’m pitching an idea to Lifetime TV about it where I interview famous people, or semi-famous people, about their mental health struggles and we do a show or a series of shows on it. It all depends on how many people want to step forward and help out.”

“It’ll just take one person big enough and famous enough to get everybody’s attention” Whitney encouraged

“And I think I want to do the soccer academy.”

Whitney raised her eyebrows and looked at the keeper for a long minute. The two women had been developing their dream soccer academy since they were in college. It had started as a joke. What would be the ideal college experience? It would be all soccer and parties and no classes or anything unfun like that. Gradually, as they had matured, it evolved and became more realistic. By the time they had become road roommates for the Breakers their nighttime chatter often involved their dream soccer academy. When the new grass fields had gone in at the old field they played on before the big stadium opened in Cambridge they had liked the type of grass the grounds crew used so much that Whitney told Ashlyn they should use it for the academy. That’s what they called it, the academy. ‘One day we’ll have a boot wall like this at the academy’ or ‘our pinnies will get washed every day at the academy’. Neither woman had ever figured out how to make it happen and it had always been just a fun thing to plan out and fantasize about. Until now.

“What do you mean?” Whitney’s eyes were full of shock and wonder.

“I mean, if it’s ok with you?”

“Ok with me? Of course it’s ok with me. Ash, how are you going to do that?”

“I haven’t figured it out yet” she shrugged her shoulders. “But that’s what I really want to do. I’d like it to be all girls but I don’t think we could do that to start with anyway. But we’ll see. And, um, I’d love for you to do it with me, but I know you didn’t go to law school so you could start a summer soccer camp for three months a year.”

“Wow” Whitney was quiet and Ashlyn couldn’t read the look on her face.

“Are you mad? I haven’t done anything about the academy yet” the keeper spoke quickly, trying to smooth over any hurt feelings. “I haven’t even told Ali about it yet...”

“No, Ash” the law student smiled shyly. “I’m not mad. I’m proud of you.”

“What? Why?”

“I came to a crossroads in my life and I took the safe path. The path so many people in my family have taken. Academia. Don’t get me wrong, I really want to be a lawyer and it’s been a dream of mine for a very long time, but the academy...” she ended a little breathless with a big grin on her
face. “That’s the dreamiest dream of all. And you’re going to do it, I know you are.”

“If I was smart enough to be a lawyer I might have had a tougher decision to make” the keeper joked. “But we can do it together, if you want.”

“Of course I’d love that, but I don’t know what I can do to help. I mean, I’ll help you with the legal stuff...”

“And the soccer stuff, and the life stuff, and the camper stuff...” Ashlyn started listing off all of the elements to the academy until they were both laughing.

“Ok, ok” Whitney finally got control of herself. “If you’re really going to do it, of course I want in. Definitely.”

“Awesome!” the keeper hugged her bestie again. “Let’s get together and do some brainstorming and see what we’ve got. Then we can figure out the rough timing of it and make a plan. We’ll need investors and, like a board of directors I think. I don’t think we’ll really be able to do too much with it until the end of next year anyway, you’ll be finishing school and I’ll, hopefully, be pregnant and then taking care of a newborn. But maybe we can shoot for our first academy camp the summer of 2024. Maybe 2025.”

“Wow” Whitney said again with another big grin. “I love the way that sounds.”

The conversation Ashlyn had been dreading for almost three months was happening right in front of her and she felt like she was sleepwalking through it. She couldn’t get her mind to focus on anything. She could hear the coach’s voice with his British accent and she could hear her wife’s voice.

“Ashlyn are you sure?” the coach snapped her out of her daze when he let his forearm fall down onto the top of his desk in frustration. The loud noise got her attention.

“Yeah coach. I’m sure. I can’t do it. And, even if I could somehow get my leg back in soccer shape, I don’t want to anymore” she answered softly, a little embarrassed to admit the truth.

They had been in the coach’s office for fifteen minutes and as soon as Ashlyn had told him she intended to retire it had gone downhill. The coach started talking about all of his big plans to get the team headed back in the right direction this season and how excited he was about training camp. He felt good about the draft class and was eager to start shaping the team. When he had run out of things to say he had begun telling his best keeper what a mistake he thought she was making. Ashlyn had zoned out halfway through the part about training camp but Ali had come to her wife’s defense as the coach started criticizing her decision. That’s when the coach had gotten frustrated and dropped his arm. Now he didn’t know what to do.

His best leader on the team, his toughest competitor, the most talented goalkeeper he had ever coached, was telling him she didn’t want to play anymore.

“Well that doesn’t fit the player I know. That’s not the person who was so hellbent on turning her team around last season, right up to the very end.” He was getting desperate now and he shot a glance Ali’s way. “It sounds like somebody might be pushing you to do this Ashlyn and that would be a real shame.”

“Excuse me” Ali spoke carefully. She really hadn’t said much up to that point, letting her more than capable wife handle her own affairs. The brunette was there officially as Ashlyn’s agent but she was really there for moral support. “We’ve known each other a long time Matt so I’m going to let that slide but...”
“Well I’m not” Ashlyn interrupted, leaning forward in her seat in front of the coach’s desk. “I don’t like your insinuation coach. I’m a big girl and I make my own decisions. The only one doing any pushing around here is you.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I’m just...I hadn’t planned on this and I hate to lose you, not just on the pitch but...I’m sorry Ali” he said the last line right to the brunette with an apologetic nod of his head.

“It’s not how I saw my career ending either” Ashlyn chuckled ruefully. “But we can’t all go out like Whit did, winning the Supporters Shield and then the Championship on our home pitch.” She paused for a minute. “Some of us get hit by a car in a freak accident, have a difficult time rehabbing and their priorities change.” She looked the man she had played for over the past seven seasons in the eye and gave him a small smile. “No hard feelings coach.”

Before they were able to leave the building they had to meet with the general manager, then Jonathan Kraft, and then an HR person with papers to sign. They insisted on putting Ashlyn on the disable list so she could change her mind if she wanted to. She promised them she wouldn’t be changing her mind and was going to start telling people she was retired if the subject came up. She finally agreed to let them keep her on the 45-day disabled list she had been on since the beginning of training camp, but that was it. After that she was going to make an announcement so her fans would know what was going on. She felt very strongly that she wanted to be up front and honest with all of her supporters. That meant that she would stay quiet through the month of April, but as of May 1st she would share her retirement news with the women’s soccer world.

On her way out she stopped in the locker room where the team was just coming in from their morning conditioning session to go eat lunch. The coach had given her permission to tell the team her news. Ali waited for her on a bench in the corridor outside the locker room, returning emails and phone calls during what she knew would be a long wait. When her wife emerged from the locker room almost an hour later she looked drained and depressed and awful. The brunette stood up and walked towards her and when Ashlyn heard the heels of her shoes clicking on the cement she tried to look cheerful. It was no use. By the time she found her way into Ali’s arms the keeper was crying and trying her best not to breakdown completely.

“You’re ok babe” Ali soothed as they hugged tightly. “It'll be ok. Just give yourself some time and feel what you need to feel. It’ll all be alright.”

They sat together on the bench where Ali had been waiting and held hands while Ashlyn tried to pull herself together. They both knew it wouldn’t look good if anybody saw her leaving the building crying and upset. Not that it really mattered anymore, but both women wanted the split with the team to be clean and as good as possible. Ali had supported the team before she even knew her wife and that wasn’t going to stop now that Ashlyn didn’t play for them anymore. Not to mention that K-H still represented almost the entire team and the brunette was going to have a professional relationship with the organization for a very long time. And Ashlyn loved the Breakers more than she even thought she did. She bled Breaker blue now, almost as devotedly as she bled Carolina blue. She would always want to see the team win and do well, no matter what.

“God that was awful” she finally said, leaning back against the concrete wall behind the bench.

“I’m so sorry honey.”

“I was doing ok until fucking Kristie.” She shook her head and then smiled as a few more tears fell. “She’s always so tough, you know? But she’s really such a softie.”

“Sounds like someone else I know” Ali smiled and kissed her wife on the cheek. “I'll never forget when she got all emotional about you at your first championship game. The one in Orlando,
“How could I forget” the blonde chuckled. “She turned that media day into a feeding frenzy.”

“Yeah, but that wasn’t her intention. She spoke from her heart that day and that’s when I realized what an impact you had on your teammates Ash. They looked up to you, even the great ones like Kristie and Whitney. Every player you played with got better because of you. They watched you and listened to you and learned from you.”

“Well, Kristie just burst into tears and hugged me on my way out the door.” She cleared her throat and tried not to cry again. “Didn’t even say anything, just held on for dear life.” She paused. “Fuck me, I’m going to miss this place.”

The next morning Ashlyn got a call while she was doing her rehab work in the basement gym. Normally she wouldn’t interrupt that time for anybody, but it was Bob Kraft’s name flashing across her phone screen so she turned the music off and took the call. He apologized for not calling yesterday and then spent ten minutes asking her how the kids were and Ali and the house. He worked his way to the leg rehab and then moved on to the excitement of the 2022 season and training camp. Finally he said what he had called to say.

“Ashlyn I’m just devastated that we’re losing you. And by we I mean the whole of Boston and New England’s sports fans, not just our Breakers family.” He paused and cleared his throat. “You know I’m not an expert on soccer” he chuckled. “I’ve been learning a lot over the past few years, but even back when I didn’t know very much at all I knew you were special. Jonathan would show me something, a video clip or a gif or whatever on his phone, and he would say ‘Dad, you’ve gotta see this incredible save!’ And it would be you doing some acrobatic leap or dive to block a shot and keep your team in the game. Even I could see how great you were. I didn’t even know what a sweeper keeper was but I knew your style didn’t look like everybody else’s, even though I didn’t understand why or how. And as sad as I am to hear that you’re retiring, I’m just so proud to have gotten to be a small part of your amazing career. You’re a special player and a special person and it’s been an honor to work with you. I just wanted you to know that. And I would have said it to you in person but I’m travelling and won’t be back home for another week. Thank you Ashlyn for representing the Breakers with such distinction and integrity all these years. We’re really going to miss you.”

Ashlyn could barely speak when the owner of her team was done talking. He didn’t have to make this phone call. And he definitely didn’t have to say any of those really nice things about her. She, along with the rest of the Patriots fans in New England, had heard about how close he got to some of his players and how much he cared about the team and made a point to know everybody’s spouse’s name and as many of their kids as possible. She had always sort of taken that with a grain of salt, assuming a lot of it had been exaggerated a bit. But now, after getting to know the man and play under his ownership for three years plus this weird time this season, she knew those stories were all true. He had called her several times since the accident to check on her and see how she was doing. It was about once a month, on average, and he didn’t call to see how her leg rehab was going from a company or team standpoint. He called to talk to a woman who had almost died and whose son had almost been seriously hurt or worse. He wanted to know how Ashlyn the mom and human was doing and if there was anything he could do to help her. The only thing she asked for was that the two girls, Anna and Lena, who had helped Drew be able to go talk to a therapist about everything they had seen that awful day. Ashlyn didn’t know for sure, but she suspected the girls didn’t have very good, if any, health insurance. Not only did Bob Kraft take care of that, but he gave their father Vilmos a job at the stadium. Ashlyn had been shocked when she had heard that. She knew the billionaire wasn’t perfect but he had always treated her like his own daughter, and Ali as well. Maybe their politics didn’t align all the time but she knew he respected her and cared about her as a
human being and she loved him for it.

“I’m going to miss you too Bob” she managed to get her voice to work, albeit haltingly. “And everybody. Working for you in that beautiful stadium with all the great people you put together – well, it’s just been the joy of my lifetime, career-wise anyway. I can’t thank you enough.”

They talked for a few more minutes and made plans to have lunch together when he was back in town. He had some ideas he wanted to run by her about making her an ambassador of sorts. She would remain in the employ of the Breakers but work in the outreach department. They had done it successfully with the Patriots for many years. Former players went out into the community and represented the Patriots organization and Bob Kraft himself, spreading goodwill and often donating money to a worthwhile cause. They built playgrounds at schools and wheelchair ramps at retirement homes and did good deeds like that all year round. He wanted to talk with Ashlyn about what her plans were and see if she could manage to do some of this outreach work for them too. She quickly agreed and shook her head in disbelief when she ended the call. She wanted to call Ali right away and tell her the good news but she made herself finish her workout first. Even though she wasn’t going to play professional soccer anymore she wanted to be able to walk and run and play with her kids without a limp for the rest of her life.

Later that night as they were getting ready for bed the keeper finally got to hear what her beautiful brunette thought about Bob Kraft’s phone call.

“It’s a terrific idea. You’d be perfect for that” Ali enthused as she pulled pajama pants on and opened a dresser drawer to look for a t-shirt to sleep in. She sighed loudly when she found the drawer empty. “Did you put the clothes in the drier?”

“Yes” Ashlyn answered, happy that she had remembered. She looked at her frustrated wife standing there topless and felt a pang of desire. “What’s the matter baby?”

Ashlyn walked the two steps from her dresser to Ali’s right next to it and looked into the open drawer. She rested her hand on Ali’s hip and let her thumb caress the bare skin just above it.

“I don’t have a t-shirt to sleep in...”

“Why don’t you sleep in one of these?” the keeper asked, holding up one of the racer back tank tops Ali used to sleep in before her pregnant belly and breasts had made them all too small. “Do you not like them anymore?”

There was nothing but sweetness and curiosity in Ashlyn’s voice. No judgment or accusation or hidden agenda. Ali opened her mouth to answer, but in a moment of shyness, closed it again and looked down bashfully.

“It’s ok” the keeper said softly and kissed her wife’s cheek. “I was just curious. I’ll run down and get the laundry. But we’re not folding it tonight. I’ll do it in the morning...”

“No, don’t.” Ali shook her head and blushed a little, grabbing Ashlyn’s arm to keep it where it was on her hip. She took a breath and exhaled, still not meeting her wife’s eyes yet. “I feel fat in these” she nodded at the sleep tank the keeper still held in her other hand over the open drawer. “My stomach’s still not where I want it to be...”

“Al, honey, can I tell you something?” Ashlyn’s voice was soft and serious and her face was a sweet smile. She waited a minute but when her wife didn’t say or do anything but look down again she continued. “You look great. I’m sorry I haven’t told you more often, but I didn’t want to make you think about something that I knew you were still a little self-conscious about so I guess I just stopped
saying it at all. That’s my fault. I’m sorry.”

“Ashlyn, you don’t have to tell me I’m pretty just to make me feel good” the brunette lifted her eyes and started to feel exposed when she saw the blonde’s eyes roaming her torso appreciatively.

“It’s not just to make you feel good though. I don’t know if you’re too close to it to be able to see it clearly or what, but you’ve been working hard and you look really beautiful baby. I’m telling you.” She moved her hand from Ali’s hip across her stomach to her other hip and then back again, slowly. They kept their eyes on each other the whole time and Ali could see that Ashlyn was being honest and sincere. “When was the last time you put one of these on?”

“I don’t know” the brunette replied and thought some more. “A while ago I guess.”

“See what I mean? I’ll bet you they fit you great again. But it doesn’t matter what you wear to bed sweetheart. As long as you’re comfortable.” She leaned in and kissed Ali’s lips softly. “I’ll be right back with the laundry. Don’t worry.”

She moved past her beautiful brunette on her way towards the bed and the door to the backstairs just beyond it. It took her a minute to get there and when she was just about to open the door she heard her wife’s voice behind her.

“What do you think?”

Ashlyn turned back towards the dressers and waited for Ali to step into view near the foot of the bed. The brunette stood there nervously with her hands at her sides and her face a questioning half-smile. Her face looked ridiculously young and innocent in that moment and the keeper’s heart swelled with love.

“See, I told you it would look great. You look beautiful Ali” she smiled lovingly at her wife. “Does it feel tight?

“No” she shook her head. “I can’t believe it” she sounded genuinely surprised.

Ashlyn took her hand off the doorknob, walked back over to her grinning girl and gave her a sweet, romantic kiss.

“Are you sure you’re comfortable in that?” she asked, pulling her lips away just far enough to speak, keeping their faces only an inch apart.

“Yeah, I’m good. It feels good. Thank you for helping me with that babe. I love you so much” she kissed her keeper back, deepening it and enjoying the way Ashlyn’s hands moved across her back.

“Well that’s too bad then, because I’m a really big fan of the topless thing you had going on there” the blonde purred as she moved her lips across her wife’s jaw and towards her ear.

“Oh yeah?” Ali smirked and grabbed a fistful of the short hair at the back of her wife’s head.

“Yeah, I’m good. It feels good. Thank you for helping me with that babe. I love you so much” she kissed her keeper back, deepening it and enjoying the way Ashlyn’s hands moved across her back.

“Well that’s too bad then, because I’m a really big fan of the topless thing you had going on there” the blonde purred as she moved her lips across her wife’s jaw and towards her ear.

“Oh yeah?” Ali smirked and grabbed a fistful of the short hair at the back of her wife’s head. “Well I know it’s important to keep the fans happy so...do what you must.”

The keeper paused and met her wife’s eyes again with a slightly more serious look on her face.

“I didn’t tell you all of that just to get into your pants. You know that, right?”

“I do” Ali smiled tenderly and caressed her wife’s cheek. “But when you’re that sweet to me it makes me want you so bad” she bit her bottom lip and levelled the blonde with a sultry look. “I can’t help it.”
Ashlyn pulled back and looked at her wife with both love and lust in her eyes as she lifted the sleep tank up and over her head. She grinned at her beautiful brunette before bringing their lips together in a deep, passionate kiss.
She's a Biter

Before they knew it, summer was here and it was June already. Ashlyn had begun travelling two days a week in mid-April so she could do the NWSL feature player interviews for the two games of the week each weekend. The league and network had determined which players they wanted the keeper to interview once the schedule had been determined, but Ashlyn learned the hard way not to go too far in advance with any background work because they could, and did, change their minds up to one week before. So she interviewed the players over the phone for an hour or so, sometimes over two or three phone calls depending on who the player was and what they were talking about. That happened usually early in the week, Sunday or Monday or Tuesday. Then Ashlyn would fly to the two cities, back to back on consecutive days, and a camera crew would film the excursion and the sit-down interview. Then she would fly home and wait to start again with the next week’s interview subjects. The interviews she did would be edited and then aired the following weekend, one during the Saturday afternoon game and the other during the Sunday afternoon game.

Ashlyn loved it. Except for the travelling. But it worked out to be just one night away from home, if she got lucky with her flights departing and arriving on time. When the travel schedule got too nutty she complained and started being smarter about the scheduling. Instead of flying from Boston to Los Angeles on Wednesday to interview Alex Morgan, and then from LA to Orlando on Thursday to interview Marta in her farewell season, Ashlyn combined trips to the same area and did interviews accordingly. There was a FIFA break each month up until September which the blonde would normally have off because most of the players took off. Ashlyn worked with some players through the first two FIFA breaks in April and May to get ahead on some interviews. She started making trips to Chicago and Minnesota in one week and then Orlando and Atlanta the next week so she wasn’t zig-zagging all across the country. She had made eight trips in April and May and had worked most of the kinks out of the program so it was easier for everybody. And Lifetime TV would just have to air what was available instead of keeping everybody guessing until the last minute.

April had been tough for the keeper to deal with when the Breakers season started, without her. She had prepared herself as best she could but it still hit her hard. She attended the Breakers team Meet and Greet with the season ticket holders and VIPS just before the home opener, like she always did. Since she hadn’t officially retired yet, publicly anyway, it would have been odd for her not to be at the event and she knew the fans would be happy to see her there. So when the general manager of the team asked her to attend, she went and enjoyed it. She tried to take it all in, knowing it was her last one. It was also the busiest weekend, as it happened every four or five years. The Breakers home opener was Saturday April 16th, then Easter Sunday was the 17th, then the Boston Marathon was Monday the 18th and Ashlyn was able to participate in all three. Because of the big combination Easter/Marathon weekend, Kyle and Nathan came up and stayed at the big old house for the long weekend. They took part in all three events as well and it was Nathan’s very first time volunteering at the Marathon. Ashlyn couldn’t believe it was only her second, but she loved that she was there with her beautiful brunette. They spent the whole morning on the course at their preferred volunteer spot and then spent the whole afternoon by the finish line, eating, drinking and hanging out with friends from all over the city. It turned out to be one of their very best Marathon days ever. The weather was nice, not too hot and not too cold, and they saw more of their friends that afternoon than they had in the past two years combined. It just all worked out that several different groups of friends were in the city that afternoon and they managed to get to the same place for several hours. Ali and Sydney saw friends from high school that they hadn’t seen in years. And Ashlyn saw a bunch of Boston Pride hockey players who were in town early that season for some publicity and marketing meetings. That was in addition to the usual group of Breakers players and other friends like Niki and Molly, Kyle and Nathan, Sarah and Erin and the rowdy Carm, Jessie, Liz, Erica and Heather group. It was just one of those perfect days that they would look back on for years to come as the pinnacle
of Marathon days.

May went by just as quickly but they paused everything to celebrate Drew’s third birthday on the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend. His actual birthday was Friday but Deb, Tammye and Carol all wanted to be there for the party so the Grandmas got their way, as it should be. Nobody could believe he was three years old already. He was happily sleeping in his own big boy shark bed, able to get most of his own clothes on for himself if you laid them out for him, brushing his own teeth in the morning although one of his moms gave them a good brushing for him at night just to be safe, and fully potty trained with no accidents. He just had to work on wiping his own bum but he had a full year to get that mastered before he went to preschool. He was a good kid most of the time, but he was turning three and they all knew that meant that he would be challenging everything for the next year. Ali and Ashlyn had watched Cash Dwyer, Noah Cross, and Johnny Harris all go through it so they knew they were in trouble.

They just had the birthday party at the big old house and had the kids run around the backyard in their bathing suits playing in the kiddie pool, on the slip and slide and chasing each other with water balloons until they were exhausted. Ali successfully made a birthday cake that was shaped like a big number 3 and hid the coins inside each piece of cake. Little Micky Donaldson, the youngest of the next door neighbors’ kids, got the piece with the button in it and won the prize. Josie tried so desperately to keep up with the bigger kids but she was only two months into crawling and didn’t stand a chance. Ashlyn put her suit on and braved the backyard battle zone to protect the 11-month old so she could still be a part of the festivities. Dom did the same with James but he wasn’t even crawling yet. They sat by the side of the garage with Persey and watched all the fun. Fred, of course, was right in the middle of it all and Deb had to remind more than one of the rambunctious little ones not to hit the dogs with the water balloons. Ali and Ashlyn had invited most of the kids Drew’s age from his daycare and some of them made the drive up to Gloucester for the party. But, as would happen to him for the rest of his life, Drew’s party was sparsely attended because a lot of people went away for the long holiday weekend with their families.

Maybe it was because she was frustrated by being limited to crawling, or maybe it was because she was teething and her teeth hurt, or maybe it was just because she felt like it, but Josie caused the scene of the day when she leaned over out of the blue and bit down hard on James’ little arm. Ashlyn had just carried her over to the side of the garage where it was calmer and quieter so she could have a little break from all of the active older kids. James was just sitting there minding his own business and chewing on his own teething ring because he was just starting to get his very first teeth himself. Ashlyn watched it happen in slow motion and was horrified as her sweet baby girl leaned over and chomped down on his skinny little bicep. James howled in pain and Josie leaned back quickly and looked towards her mama because she knew she had been bad. There was a deep, red bite mark on poor James’ arm and Dom had no idea what had happened.

“Josie! No!” Ashlyn yelled at her daughter and picked her up while Dom looked at James’ arm and figured it out. “I’m so sorry Dom” she apologized quickly as she blushed in embarrassment. “I’m sorry James” she cupped the boy’s tear stained cheek as Dom picked him up with a frown.

Everybody was looking at the scene by the side of the garage. James’ cries were not the fake or even the minor kind, but the kind that most grown-ups could identify as serious. Ashlyn didn’t know what to do. She was furious with Josie and knew she needed to discipline her but she wanted to make sure that James was ok too. Drew had never been a biter and they had never been in a position quite like this before. He had come home from daycare with a few bites though. Ali and Sydney both came running out of the kitchen door in a panic.

“Get him some ice” Ashlyn yelled to her wife. “Josie bit him.”
Ali’s eyes went wide and then she, too, blushed as she hurried back inside the kitchen to get one of the small, kid-friendly freezer packs they kept just for such occasions.

“It’s alright kids” Molly said to the rest of the children who had halted all play to watch the crying baby get carried into the house. “He’ll be ok in a few minutes. Go on and play now” she kicked a beach ball towards the group of them and they scattered and jumped right back into playing again.

Niki walked over to Ashlyn with a small smile on her face and whispered in her ear.

“You’re doing good. You said no to her right away and then you turned your attention to James. That’s the right first two steps. If you guys use a time-out spot you should put her in it for a few minutes so she gets used to the idea. Make sure you tell her not to bite, and why. And then stand near her but don’t give her any attention until her couple of minutes are up.”

Ashlyn looked at her friend with her mouth open, astonished at the insider information she was getting.

“How...?”

“Noah was a biter” she shrugged. “It sucked.”

The keeper walked into the kitchen and put Josie down in one of the spare kitchen table chairs that they kept on either side of the fireplace. They usually used the one closest to the backstairs for Drew’s timeouts so that’s where she put her 11-month old daughter who still looked like she knew she had done something wrong. She was smart and both Ashlyn and Ali knew it.

“You’re in a time-out Josie” Ashlyn explained with a flat and even voice. She didn’t raise her voice or make a threatening face. She just squatted down in front of the little girl and spoke calmly but seriously. “We don’t bite. Biting hurts. You bit James and now you’re in a time-out. You stay here and don’t move until I say you can.”

She stood up and turned around to see several faces looking at her with varied looks of amusement, pity, understanding and one with an odd combination of horror and love. Ali walked over to her and squeezed her hand as the blonde sat in the chair at the kitchen table closest to the toddler, with her back to the time-out chair.

“Oh my God” the brunette whispered as her eyebrows went up. “I’m sorry honey. What can I do?”

“It’s good” the keeper whispered back. “Just keep getting the cake ready. I’ll let her out in another minute and then we’ll go apologize to James. How is he?”

“She bit him really hard. She broke the skin but he’ll be ok. They’re in the living room with some of the grandmas. Poor little guy.”

Julie Donaldson was just putting a bandaid on the bite when Ashlyn walked in with Josie a few minutes later. James had stopped crying but still looked really upset as he sat on his mom’s lap. Julie gave the keeper a sympathetic smile as she walked past them on her way out of the room. Ashlyn looked at Sydney and when the coach nodded her head she knelt down in front of James with Josie on her hip.

“Hi James” she smiled at the boy. “Are you doing ok? That’s a pretty cool bandaid” she admired his dinosaur bandaid and grinned at him. “Josie wants to say she’s sorry for biting you” she said to James and then turned to look at her daughter. “Right Josie?”

Josie couldn’t really talk very well yet although she was getting better all the time. She had said her
first word back in April and had mastered a couple more but that was about it. She and Ali had been sitting in the living room after her afternoon nap and they heard the tell-tale sound of Drew’s little heels up above them as he got out of bed after his nap.

“Ohh, sounds like your brother’s awake” Ali smiled at her baby girl.

Josie, who had just finished her bottle and was in a very good mood, started making all sorts of sounds and clapped her hands.

“Mom-my!” they heard his little voice call out from the top of the stairs as he waited impatiently for Ali to come up and open the gate for him.

“Who’s that?” the brunette asked Josie as she stood up and walked to the foot of the front stairs. “Is that Drew?”

When they got to the foot of the stairs Drew saw them and hopped up and down in excitement, making Ali grin.

“I’m coming sweet boy. Just wait for a minute...”

“Doo” Josie said and smiled up at her brother as she clapped her hands. “Doo!”

“Did you just say ‘Drew’?” Ali asked her daughter, shocked.

“Doo!” she said again.

“Who’s that?” Ali pointed to the top of the stairs and watched the little girl carefully.

“Doo!!” she said, louder than the previous three times.

“Good girl! That’s right. It’s Drew!” Ali kissed her girl’s cheek and put her on the floor inside the living room, behind another gate, as she ran up to get her son and bring him down.

They spent the next half hour asking Josie to say his name over and over again. Drew would point at himself and Josie would say it again. Ali was able to get a short, out of focus video of some of it to send to Ashlyn who was travelling for her interview show and the keeper thought she was going to pass out from the cuteness of it all.

But at Drew’s birthday party the following month, Josie could only sit there on her mama’s hip and look sad and sorry. James was 6 months old and Josie was 11 months old and neither of them would remember this in another hour but the Kriegers wanted to make sure they handled this right so they could try and nip the biting bug in the butt.

“We’re sorry, right Josie?” Ashlyn repeated, looking at the girl again until she nodded her little red head in agreement. “Good girl. Now go play” she put the toddler on the living room floor and watched her crawl away towards some toys by the doorway to the mudroom. Ashlyn turned her full attention to the Dwyers.

“God you guys, I’m so sorry!” she closed her eyes and put her hand on Sydney’s leg and Dom’s arm. “Is he ok? Ali said she broke the skin...she’s only got six teeth. I can’t believe she did that!”

“Oh relax” Sydney chuckled as Dom got up with a smile to go back outside, patting Ashlyn on the shoulder as he walked by. “He’ll be ok. Will you be ok?” she laughed.

“No” the keeper shook her head and closed her eyes.
“Lots of kids bite Ash, don’t get too upset about it. Cash came home from daycare with, like, a bite a week for a while there. Remember that little kid with the long blonde hair when you first started bringing Drew there?”

“Oh yeah. I remember that now.”

“It happens. Drew must have been bitten before too...”

“Sure, but I don’t know, this seems so much worse.”

“Because your precious angel girl bit my cute little baby boy at your son’s birthday party in front of everybody you know?” she chuckled. “Yeah, sounds about right to me.”

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For the first time ever in their eight year friendship and relationship, Ali and Ashlyn went to the Gay Pride parade in Boston early that June. For whatever reason, usually the Breakers schedule or a newborn baby in their family, they had never been able to go together and they were more than excited to attend this year. Dom was away with the Revolution that weekend so Sydney couldn’t join them but Whitney came and they all hung out together in a sweet corner spot by one of the only lesbian bars in the city. Sarah and Erin knew the owner and when they told her that Ashlyn Harris and a bunch of Breakers and Pride players wanted to come and party with them for the parade she was only too happy to make room for them. The bar was one of the only gay-owned bars right on the parade route and it was really the best place to be if you were a gay lady in the city of Boston. The place was packed and that’s why it was invitation only. Boston had a strict ‘no open container’ law so you had to drink inside the bar and then go out onto the outdoor seating area and sidewalk for some sun and a close-up view of the parade.

Most of the bar patrons were good about not bothering Ashlyn too much. The other players were protective of her if somebody got too up close and personal and, for the most part, it was a really fun day for everybody. Ali couldn’t blame the other women for wanting to be close to her wife. Ashlyn looked good. She had been sporting a real, perfectly coiffed fade since about December when her head wound was pronounced officially healed and she could get someone to cut and shave and trim it correctly for her. She let her natural, light brown hair stay at the bottom and back but she went for the shock of blonde on top, where the hair was longer. She liked being a blonde and was unapologetic about it. The keeper wore some comfortably faded and slightly scruffy looking light blue jean shorts with a multi-colored, rainbow sports bra and a loose, open, black tank top with a unicorn on the front. She had tricked out her jewelry with as much rainbow as possible and that meant rainbow stud earrings, rainbow rope beads around her neck, and lots of fabric, rainbow bracelets on her wrists. She had sunglasses on when she was outside and she looked gorgeous with a mega-watt smile, cheekbones for days and that dimple that made Ali, and thousands of others, weak in the knees. Her tattoos were all on full display, even a lot of her colorful side tattoo was visible in the gaping opening of her tank top. The only ones you couldn’t really see were on her right thigh, and she was ok with that because those were her most intimate pieces of body art.

As usual, the keeper was fairly oblivious to all the lustful stares she got all day but she would be the first one to tell you it was because she couldn’t take her own eyes off of her beautiful wife. Ali finally felt like she had her body back that summer. She knew her stomach would never be as tight as it was before she had kids, but she had worked her butt off, persevering even for months when there was little or no result to be seen. She finally felt comfortable putting on a bikini again and it had taken her a full year to get there. She had been lucky in both her pregnancies that the only visible evidence of the miracle her body had performed was the stretch marks by her hips from Drew and the c-section scar from Josie. She didn’t have any varicose veins in her legs or spiderweb-like
stretchmarks all across her stomach. She knew it was dumb luck and she appreciated it. Sydney had a huge varicose vein on the back of one of her legs from her second pregnancy and she hated it with a passion. The brunette was grateful every day and she felt shallow and vain but she wouldn’t lie – she was happy her body still looked good.

Her legs weren’t as long as Ashlyn’s toned ones but they were stronger and more muscular. The extra work she had been forced to do on her abs had caused her arms and legs to become more muscular than ever and nobody was complaining. Ali wore black short shorts that emphasized her gorgeous ass and her strong, athletic legs. Honestly, Ashlyn didn’t see anything except her brunette’s legs, ass and face for most of the day. She just couldn’t keep her eyes anywhere but those places, no matter how hard she tried. Ali also opted for a rainbow sports bra like her wife’s and a tank top that wasn’t as loose and open as Ashlyn’s. The brunette struggled with what shirt to wear. Her favorite was a white tank that had a pair of black-rimmed glasses on it and said ‘I like my women like I like my glasses, sitting on my face.’ But she chickened out at the last minute and changed into a pale purple tank that had a picture of two princesses kissing and said ‘Happily Ever After’. They certainly weren’t looking for any publicity that day but she knew Ashlyn would be recognized at some point and they weren’t going to shy away from it either. Ali started out with her long hair down, but it was a hot and humid day and she gradually went to a high pony tail and then all the way up to a bun when she couldn’t stand her hair on her neck anymore. She went with as many rainbow accessories as possible too, even adding some stickers and face paint to her bare arms and cheeks.

“Damn baby” Ashlyn whined as they parked her car at the Knight-Harris office and walked to the nearby subway station. “You’re killing me already and it’s not even 10am! I’m never going to make it through this day.”

“I know the feeling All-star” the brunette grinned and wrapped her wife in a hug, pressing her entire body up against the keeper’s as they kissed for a minute in the parking lot behind the building. “You look sexy as hell and I’m going to have to beat the women off of you today with a stick.”

“You know I don’t care about any of that nonsense” Ashlyn met her wife’s eyes as she slid her hand down and gently cupped her incredible ass. “Right?”

“I’ll try not to get too jealous. No guarantees, but I’ll try” she winked at the blonde and held her hand as they started their walk.

She really wanted to ask her sexy and popular wife to stay close to her that day, but she felt silly and small for even thinking it. She knew it wasn’t attractive to be so needy and clingy and she bit back the words without letting them pass her lips. Ali had no doubt that Ashlyn would be faithful to her and that’s why they were able to go and do these sorts of things together without the brunette freaking out every time a fan or stranger or drunk lesbian tried to grope, grab, hug or kiss her wife. She knew how lucky she was to have Ashlyn and she couldn’t blame other women for wanting her too. But, if she was completely honest, it pissed her off when they got their grubby hands on Ashlyn. A friendly hug or some innocent side touching during a selfie was one thing, but as soon as they started getting grabby, Ali’s anger started to spike. It was just rude. How would you like it if some random person came up to you and tried to grab your ass or squeeze your breast or kiss your cheek?

Miraculously, they made it through the parade and most of the rest of the afternoon without any incidents. Ashlyn had posted a couple of pictures on her social media saying how awesome it was to be celebrating the day and the parade with her wife. Ali even let her post a picture of her kissing Ashlyn’s cheek. The brunette was drunk on love and pride and her sexy keeper and she felt so proud of their life together. What they hadn’t anticipated was the Instagram story one of the Pride players posted that had Ashlyn and Ali in the background with their hands on each other’s asses. By the third installment of the story, in which the Pride player was trying to film another Pride player doing
some bar trick with a coaster and a bottle cap, they were sharing a kiss and a smirk and then Ashlyn brought her lips to her wife’s neck and her hand moved down her ass to the back of her thick thigh and squeezed. It had been a very intimate but brief moment the couple shared and it was now out there for all the Tumblr girls to copy, blow up, slow down, dissect, critique, and post on all their blogs. Ashlyn and Ali didn’t find out about it until late that night. Truthfully, Ashlyn was only concerned with Ali’s feelings about it. From the blonde’s point of view it was no big deal. The kiss had been chaste, as all of their public kisses usually were, they were a married couple so there was no scandal, and Ali looked like a million bucks. They counted their blessings that nobody had filmed them as they made out like desperate teenagers in the bathroom stall shortly after that video had been taken. But if ever there was a time or a place for them to be caught in a semi-compromising position, Ali could think of no better or more appropriate time than during the Pride parade and celebration. The brunette had a momentary heart attack when she saw the video later that night but she basically agreed with her wife’s assessment of it. It was no big deal and Ali laughed it off. She later admitted, with much embarrassment, to Sydney and her brother that she would have been pissed if she had been caught at an unflattering angle. She was only human, and she was thankful she had worked so hard all those months to get back in shape.

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The following weekend was another big, emotional day for the keeper. The Breakers were celebrating Whitney Engen day at the game on Saturday, June 18th. The former defender would be the honorary captain of the game and they were going to retire her number 4 at halftime and officially induct her as one of the Pillars of Excellence. Whitney would be only the fifth player to join the exclusive group and she was very proud to be recognized in that way. The three other members of the club who lived in the United States were all there to help celebrate the newest inductee. Angela Hucles, Kristine Lilly, and Leslie Osborne stood on the field at halftime in their old Breakers jerseys and waved to the crowd like the Breakers royalty they were. Ashlyn was the emcee for the halftime ceremony and she made sure she did a good job for her best friend. She reminded everyone of the defender’s impressive stats and that she was the longest tenured Pillar of Excellence and was the only Breakers player in history to be captain for so long, 6 seasons. The temptation to tease and joke and goof around with Whitney was strong but she fought it off and pulled off a very professional induction ceremony. The crowd, as they always did, roared and jumped to their feet when Ashlyn walked out with the microphone and it took the popular keeper more than a few minutes to get everybody calmed down again. Whitney’s family, her mom, dad, brother and husband Ryan, were all standing behind her as the jumbotron played footage of some of her incredible highlights. Part of the footage even included the part of the interview the former Tarheels had given when Tobin flat out told the world that the USWNT probably would have won the World Cup in 2019 if Whitney had been on the squad. The crowd erupted at that and Whitney stood there with a huge, shit-eating grin on her face. Her final ‘fuck-you’ to the national team coaches who had spurned her over the years. Whitney was as classy and professional as always when she took the microphone and spoke to the crowd. She was nervous as she started.

“Why does this always look so easy when you do it?” she quipped to Ashlyn who just smiled back at her and laughed along with the rest of the stadium.

She took her time and thanked the organization and the ownership and the coaches and training staff. She spent more time talking about what an honor it had been to captain the women who fought so hard alongside her for her six seasons in Boston. She made sure to thank her family and even gave a wordless, but special nod to her best friend. The ceremony ended with the unfurling of her own Pillar of Excellence that would fly up in the rafters of the stadium from that moment forward, right alongside Maren Meinert #6, Angela Hucles #16, Kristine Lilly #13, and Leslie Osborne #12. The banner showed an image of each of the players in an action shot, their jersey number clear as day, with their first name at the top and their last name at the bottom of the banner. Whitney’s image was
so familiar to anybody who followed any of the Breakers games during her tenure. So many plays were started by Engen out of the back and the image captured her perfectly. She had her hair in her signature braid with her thin, blue headwrap in place, the ball was on one foot, and her head was up and looking downfield with passion, urgency and ferocity in her eyes. Everybody knew what came next was a precision pass to get the next counter or offensive series started quickly and efficiently. There it was, Whitney Engen #4.

Bob Kraft himself presented her with the commemorative plaque and took a minute to tell her, and everyone else in the stadium, how proud he had been to have her as the captain of his club. He wasn’t scheduled to speak but he just couldn’t resist – he wanted everyone to know how important Whitney Engen had been to the Breakers for seven long seasons. Whitney and her family retreated up to the K-H suite to watch the game and the Breakers had the decency to win the game for their former leader. Thank God. Whitney seemed genuinely at ease with everything, once she wasn’t the center of attention anymore. She spent most of her time watching the game with either Josie or Drew on her lap. Ali got a beautiful picture of Whitney sitting next to Ryan with both Krieger kids on their laps. Miraculously, all four of them looked happy and adorable and the picture became a fast favorite that got printed, framed and hung up in the big old house.

The very next day was Josie’s first birthday and everybody reconvened in Gloucester for another party. Deb and Mike Christopher had just arrived late Saturday morning and been whisked off to Whitney’s big game. This summer they were trying something new and Deb was very excited about it. The Christophers were leasing a condo in Manchester, MA for the summer to see how Mike would like living there. Deb, who would turn 62 next month, had just finished her final year of teaching and retired. Kyle and Ali had flown down to Miami to surprise their mom for her retirement party the second week of June and spent two days of silly, sibling time together. But Mike and Deb were trying to figure out what they were going to do with the rest of their lives. Mike was two years younger than Deb and had planned to work until he was 65 but was open to retiring earlier if it worked out. Neither of them really wanted to give up their home in Miami but the pull of Deb’s grandchildren was strong. The tentative plan, depending on how this summer went for Mike, was to downsize to a condo or a smaller house in Miami and buy a condo near a golf course up near Gloucester. Mike had picked the golf course of his dreams in Massachusetts and it was located in the town just to the south west of Gloucester, Manchester, or Manchester-By-The-Sea as it was originally known, was a beautiful town along the ocean and Ali had sold windows to many gorgeous homes there, both historic and new, over the years. It was fancier and wealthier than Gloucester, which was a more working-class town, and it had one of America’s top 100 golf courses located in the Northeast corner of it. Deb and Mike would be staying in the condo and getting it set up for their summer experiment. Deb had lots of friends still on the North shore of Boston and was a very social person. Mike knew a handful of people up there through work and his company kept a thriving Boston office that he could work from or through when he was up North. Ali could not have been more excited but she tried to keep a lid on it so she didn’t jinx or spook anything. It had worked with Kyle getting together with Nathan hadn’t it?

Tammye and Carol came up for Josie’s birthday too, arriving Friday night and also attending Whitney’s big game. Tammye had mentioned to Carol once how sad it made her to miss her grandchildren’s birthdays. She had never missed Johnny or Lizzy’s but she had missed Drew’s second birthday, last year, and it had broken her heart. She wasn’t really whining about it but Carol took note and made sure they weren’t going to miss another one. As long as the birthday parties were on the weekends there was no reason they couldn’t fly up for them. They had just come up three weekends ago for Drew’s third birthday and it was easy to see how much it meant to Tammye. The two women settled into the front bedroom for the weekend and jumped right into helping out with both kids whenever they could.
The party itself was basically a repeat of Drew’s party except without his friends from daycare and with a cake shaped like the number 1 instead of a 3.

“Look at you, Queen of the number cakes” Ashlyn teased her wife Saturday night as Ali took the second cake out of the oven to cool.

She would carve the two cakes and then assemble them into the shape of the #1 in the morning before frosting the whole thing and then carefully sticking it back in the fridge until the party that afternoon. Now that she had the hang of it, the #1 couldn’t have been any easier.

“That’s me” Ali sassed with a sway of her hips. “Just doing the most for my baby girl’s party that she’ll never remember” she giggled and looked over her shoulder at her wife who was walking towards her with a smirk.

“Ah, yes but we’ll always have pictures” she joked as she wrapped her beautiful brunette up from behind and kissed her neck softly.

“I can’t believe I had such a hard time with this for Drew’s first birthday” Ali rolled her eyes as she leaned back against her wife’s chest. “Do you remember what a disaster that cake was?”

“Which one?” Ashlyn laughed. “Didn’t you butcher two of them before we gave up and ordered the shark one?”

“Three!” the brunette clarified with another laugh. “And you saved the day with the shark cake” she turned around in her wife’s arms and kissed her lips sweetly. “Thanks for sharing the credit with me though babe” she kissed her again. “You’re so sweet to me and I love you.”

They kissed again and just when Ashlyn was about to deepen it Tammye walked into the kitchen from the mudroom with two sippy cups and three different teething rings in her arms.

“Oh I’m sorry to interrupt ladies” she chuckled as she moved past them towards the sink. “I won’t be more than a minute.”

“Don’t be silly Tammye” Ali laughed. “Your daughter was just praising me for finally being able to make the easiest cake number. Honestly, that’s the only reason we had the second baby – so I could get the #1 cake right” she joked.

Both Ashlyn and Tammye laughed as the keeper moved to help her mom with the items she brought down from Drew’s room and the nursery.

“Everything go ok?” she asked as she popped the lids off the sippy cups and dumped whatever was left into the sink.

“Yes, they’re really such good kids” the proud grandmother smiled. “Drew went right down, I think he was tired from his busy day.”

“He loves being at the stadium” Ali chimed in. “All the excitement in the air really rubs off on him.”

“Knocks him out every time” Ashlyn added.

“Josie was a little tougher but I think her teeth are really bothering her. She might need a little Tylenol later if she wakes up” Tammye finished her update on bedtime for the kids. “She’s really working on the teething ring, poor thing.”

“Hey, thanks for being here for her birthday mom” the keeper dried her hands off and gave Tammye
a big hug, lifting her off the ground and surprising her.

“Oh honey, there’s no place else I’d rather be” she smiled back at her daughter.

“It seems so silly to make such a fuss when she won’t even remember it...” Ali began making apologies already but Ashlyn cut her off.

“You’re doing it already sweetheart” she chuckled as she released her mom from the hug. When she saw the blank look on her wife’s face she continued. “Apologizing for having a birthday party for a one-year old.”


“Because you’re nice” Tammye smiled at her daughter-in-law. “Just relax. It’ll be a lot of fun and Josie will be the belle of the ball, even if she doesn’t know it.”

Ashlyn chuckled and then got serious, her face falling into a worried frown as she spoke.

“I just hope she doesn’t bite anybody.”
Sorry about not posting yesterday. I got caught up in a Game of Thrones marathon of last season before the premiere last night. Oopsie.
Also smut warning.

“Oh, so that’s how you do that. I always wondered what that felt like” Ashlyn admitted shyly.

“You mean you never just felt your own before? Like, when I started to do it before the first pregnancy?” Ali asked, puzzled, as she kissed the inside of her wife’s thigh.

“Well, no” the keeper shrugged a little self-consciously and started to blush.

It was the first week of June and Ashlyn had just finished her period and was starting to chart her ovulation and body temperature and cervix mucus. She wanted to have at least three months of data so she would be ready to try and get pregnant in September.

“It’s ok honey” the brunette worked her way up her wife’s naked body, pressing sweet kisses up the middle of her stomach as she went. “It’s nothing to be embarrassed about” she said as she lay her body down on top of Ashlyn’s and kissed her lips softly. “I’ll bet most women don’t know what their cervix feels like. You’re definitely not alone” she chuckled, amused at how adorable her big strong keeper was being.

“You think?”

“I more than think” Ali grinned and kissed her wife’s nose and chin and forehead. “I’d bet a lot of money that if you went into the locker room tomorrow and asked your teammates how many of them even knew where their cervix was you’d only get about four out of the whole twenty-three that said yes.” She kissed Ashlyn’s beautiful cheekbones and then her lips again. “And of those four smart, young women I’d bet none of them has ever touched theirs.”

“Well, why would they? I mean, you didn’t make a habit of touching your cervix until you had to when you were charting the mucus, right?”

“You’re absolutely right.” Ali nodded and slowly moved her mouth across her wife’s jaw, kissing the soft, smooth skin as she went. “So don’t feel bad babe. That’s all I’m trying to say.”

“Well I didn’t until you made it seem like I should have been touching mine all along” she quirked her eyebrow at the brunette and moaned softly when she felt Ali’s tongue behind her ear.

“I’m sorry” Ali giggled and then sucked in a quick breath when she felt Ashlyn’s big hands massaging her back and teasing the top of her ass. “I just know you read all the books too and I was curious so I just assumed you would have been too. I swear, it’s so not a big deal Ash.”

“Well thank you for showing me how to find it” the keeper smiled and rolled them over so they were in opposite positions, Ashlyn on top. “I won’t lie, it probably would have taken me a little while to figure that out on my own.” She kissed her wife deeply, enjoying the feel of her naked skin beneath her. “Now where were we?”
“Oh no you don’t” Ali gave her a playfully stern look and rolled them back over to their original position. “It’s my turn and I’m not giving it up.”

“God I love when you do that” the blonde grinned from ear to ear and moved her hands all over Ali’s backside, squeezing her ass and scratching lightly at her back as she felt the brunette slide her strong thigh between her legs.

“Oh yeah?” Ali smirked. “How about that?” she asked provocatively as she pressed her thigh up into her wife’s core and held it there for a minute. She closed her eyes when she felt her keeper reach down and pull her thigh even tighter against her soft, sweet flesh. “I’ll take that as a yes” she chuckled, low and throaty, as she brought her lips down and sucked one of Ashlyn’s nipples into her mouth.

“Shit, yeah...that’s good baby.”

Ashlyn had slept with more than her fair share of women, especially when she was young and dumb in college. She had never been with anybody who was better with their mouth than Ali Krieger was. Being with the brunette was amazing in so many ways, not just in the bedroom, and the keeper was truly and properly appreciative. But goddamn did she love having sex with this woman and her mouth. It was incredible. After several minutes with Ali’s hot mouth on her breasts the keeper’s head was already starting to feel thick and fuzzy with desire. The brunette brought their lips together in a searing kiss, deepening it and lengthening it until they were both gasping for air.

“I want you to tell me what you want” Ali panted out, stopping every second word to try and catch her breath as she spoke. She was straddling Ashlyn’s right thigh with her own right thigh still securely pressed up against the blonde’s pulsing core. Ashlyn still had her left hand holding that leg in place, fingers digging into Ali’s skin at the back of her thigh. Her right hand travelled up and down her wife’s tattooed side, grabbing at her ass and then moving back up to her ribcage where she could just press her thumb against Ali’s dark nipple as they kissed.

“You...all of you...fuck baby.”

“No” Ali smirked and enjoyed how fired up her girl was getting. They had already had their desperate first round of fucking that night before the little anatomy lesson. Now they both wanted more before their exhaustion sapped them of their strength. “You have to tell me exactly what you want me to do you” the brunette’s smirk was back and bigger than before as she sat up and grinded on her wife’s thigh. “Tell me where and how fast and how deep and how hard...everything” her words left her lips slowly and seductively as she teased Ashlyn’s breasts and stomach with her fingertips.

“Fuck” the blonde moaned out slowly as her entire system was flooded with barely controllable lust.


“I want to ride your ass” she blurted out, unable to control her voice. “Fuck” she moaned again and closed her eyes to try and stay calm.

“Oooh, that sounds nice” Ali replied and felt her core twitch at the thought. “How about you do that after you fuck me from behind and make me come again...when it’s your turn” Ali brought a hand up to her own breasts and fondled them, pursing her lips and moaning at the thought of what would happen a little bit later. “Tell me what you want me to do to you, my love.”
Ashlyn swallowed hard as she watched the beauty undulating on top of her. Fuck this was hot.

“How do you want me to make you come...”

“Your mouth” her strangled voice choked out. “Please make me come with your mouth.”

“Ooooh, so fucking polite” Ali grinned wickedly. “Where do you want my mouth Ashlyn? Tell me so I can make you feel good.”

Ali was dying to fuck her wife and the delay, sexy and fun as it was, was driving her crazy.

“My pussy” she breathed out but it was barely audible.

“No, no sexy” Ali’s eyes flashed with want as she watched her keeper squirm beneath her. “You’ll have to do better than that. I can’t even hear you...”

“Jesus!” the blonde’s neck was already red and the flush was starting to creep up into her cheeks. “Please put your mouth on my pussy” she focused her eyes on the dark, chocolate ones above her, “and fuck me” Ashlyn’s voice was raspy with want but very clear.

“Mmmmmm” Ali felt a jolt course through her body, making everything tingle for a few seconds, when she heard the words from her keeper. “Now we’re talking” she purred and pried her wife’s fingers from the back of her thigh so she could move down her long body.

The brunette spent a long fifteen minutes with her tongue and mouth between Ashlyn’s legs. She loved the way the blonde hissed and groaned her pleasure out. There were soft curses and loud moans and lots and lots of passion. Ali got so carried away that she almost forgot the game she had started and just about pushed her fingers inside that beautiful pussy without being asked to.

“Mmmmm, you taste so sweet and delicious” the brunette lifted her head up, licked her lips and met her wife’s dark eyes. “What’s next?”

Ashlyn looked like she was about to explode, but when she spoke her words were surprisingly direct. Her voice was hoarse and exposed how close to the edge she really was, but her instructions were clear after an initial, nervous pause.

“I want...I want you to fuck me with the strap-on” she took a breath. “My orange one.”

“Yesss baby, that sounds so good” the brunette wiped her face on the fitted sheet between her wife’s legs and pressed a kiss to her clit before crawling to the side of the bed to get the requested toys.

It only took two minutes for Ali to get and step into the harness, securing the orange dildo that was just thick enough and just long enough for her beautiful wife’s pussy. She gave the strap-on an extra push as she adjusted it to try and get a little relief for her own aching clit. The sight of Ashlyn slowly fingering herself in anticipation almost made the brunette come undone before she even got back onto the bed. She crawled back between her wife’s long legs and ran her hands up and down the inside of her thighs that were both bent up.

“Don’t start without me” Ali teased provocatively and moved Ashlyn’s hand away from her wet center.

“Put your hair up” the keeper instructed, surprising the brunette and making her chuckle low in her throat. Ashlyn’s voice still sounded like she was carrying something very heavy but, again, she spoke directly, as if she had thought this out already. “On top of your head.” She watched while Ali crawled back to her nightstand to retrieve a hair elastic. “No, tighter than that, neater.”
Ali felt another spark shoot through her body at her bossy wife’s words. She loved when her sweet, considerate keeper took control.

“Like this?” she asked with a small pout on her face, kneeling by her nightstand with the dildo sticking up between her legs.

“Yeah, now put your glasses on and come back.”

The brunette reached behind her and slid her glasses onto her face with a smirk, never taking her eyes off of her wife. She crawled back to her spot between Ashlyn’s legs and felt her own core twitch again. Ali made a big deal out of reaching between her own legs, scooping up her own juices and lubricating the medium sized orange dildo. It was longer than average but not much thicker.

“Jesus that’s good” Ashlyn breathed out quietly, forgetting the game herself for a minute as she watched one of the sexiest things she would ever see.

“How do you want me?” Ali’s voice was thick and heavy as her own desire kept soaring.

“Just like that, but I want your mouth up here on mine” the blonde tapped her lips with one of her long fingers and spread her legs out wide. Her knees were already up and she had pushed a couple of pillows under her hips while Ali had fixed her hair. “Come on then” she jutted her chin up in a challenge. “Fuck me. I want to come with you inside me and all around me.”

The image of Ali with her hair up in a tight bun on the top of her head and her glasses on, kneeling between her legs with her favorite orange strap-on wet and ready to go was doing things to the keeper and if the brunette didn’t hurry up she was going to come before the toy was even inside her. Luckily, Ali was just as turned on and eager. She wordlessly took the tip of the toy and dragged it up and down through her wife’s soaked folds. She tapped it against her clit a couple of times and then pressed it to her inviting entrance with a smoldering look up at her keeper. She smirked over the top of her glasses and pushed the dildo into her hot core with a groan she didn’t even know she had made.

“Oh fuck, yes...” Ashlyn’s eyes rolled up into her head as she felt her wife push the dildo all the way inside her. She moved slowly but steadily, relying on the blonde to tell her if there was a need to stop. The keeper arched her back and then reached down and grabbed onto her own knees, pulling them back towards her chest and spreading her legs out even wider. “That feels so fucking incredible. Fuck...”

Ali needed a minute to catch her own breath and get her bearings. But she quickly adjusted and exhaled when she felt the strap-on bottom out inside her wife. She held still for a minute as Ashlyn’s walls clenched around the toy, getting used to it and stretching just a bit. The brunette kissed her wife’s hand that was holding her own knee and then wrapped her arms around her keeper’s thighs, just below her hips, to hold her in place as she started to pump, slowly.

“Oh yeah baby, just like that” Ashlyn encouraged.

They continued like that for several minutes and, before long, Ali was thrusting hard and fast and deep, enjoying the way her keeper’s breasts bounced with her motions and her moans grew louder and lower as she got closer to her release. The brunette felt her wife’s walls tightening and closing in around the toy and the sensations that pressure gave back to her own clit made her dizzy with desire.

“Fuck Ashlyn! Goddamn you’re so fucking sexy!”

“My...clit...” was all the blonde could manage to say but it was all Ali needed to hear.
The brunette let go of her wife’s thigh, hoping she could keep her rhythm up without it, and moved her hand to Ashlyn’s swollen clit. She got her fingers wet and slid two of them up to the sensitive nub and circled it a few times. The keeper’s whole body surged upwards for a second, like a flower reaching for the sun. Ali started rubbing Ashlyn’s clit with a steady and strong pace, eager to get her girl off and about to lose her own mind.

“Oh my God Al...yes...”

The brunette kept the pace up but was starting to feel the burn in her thighs from working so hard with the strap-on. She knew she couldn’t hold on much longer.

“Fuck!” she yelled, surprising Ashlyn a little bit and causing her to open her eyes. “Come for me baby” she urged, breathlessly, her glasses almost down to the tip of her nose. “I fucking love you so much Ashlyn...come for me!”

The brunette gave it everything she had for another few seconds, increasing the pressure on her wife’s clit once more and then watching as her body surged up again and tensed for a few seconds.

“Yesssss, oh fuck, yesssss!!!!” Ashlyn yelled as she felt her orgasm start to shake her very core.

“Aiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!”

She let go of her knees as her legs stretched out halfway and all the muscles in her abdomen clenched while her body shook with pleasure as she came. Ali moved her hand from Ashlyn’s too-sensitive clit to her thigh as she slowed way down with the dildo. Ashlyn moved a hand to hold the toy still and Ali knew that was her cue to pull it out. The keeper’s whole body shook and twitched as she rode out her high.

“Yes baby, oh yes” Ali cooed as she backed her hips out of her wife and pressed a hot kiss into the thigh she was holding. “You are the most gorgeous woman in the world. Fuck, you’re incredible.”

She took the harness off as quickly as she could and was torn between wanting to take her time and lick every inch of the slick orange dildo, covered in her wife’s sweet juices, or kissing Ashlyn’s lips and hugging her tightly as they both tried to catch their breath. Her decision was made for her when the blonde called for her.

“Come up here baby. I want to hold you...”

Ali took her glasses off as she moved up the bed, setting them safely where her pillow usually was on her side of the bed. She lay her whole body on top of Ashlyn’s and they both melted into the contact. Nothing would ever feel better than their bare skin against each other. Nothing. Ashlyn kissed her wife’s lips eagerly but they were both still too breathless for a long one. Ali buried her face in her keeper’s sweaty neck and hummed happily as the blonde wrapped her arms around her and squeezed their bodies together. This was still the best, safest place either of them could ever imagine. And it was times like this, where they had taken the time to change things up just a bit, that made all the other times, where they just blindly reached for each other in an exhausted rush to feel close and connected before somebody little woke up or somebody big fell asleep, alright.

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As soon as Ashlyn had told her, back in March, that she was going to retire and have their next baby, Ali decided she was going to try and make 2022 as fun as possible for her wife. Part of her reason was because she hoped to make the transition into retirement easier for her keeper. Maybe she wouldn’t miss the NWSL so much if she had other fun things to do? And part of the reason was because she knew from personal experience that Ashlyn wouldn’t want to be going very far once she
got really big and pregnant next year and then had their newborn baby to take care of and love. 2022 was going to be the year Ali tried to give Ashlyn as much fun as she possibly could, without actually confessing to her plan. The brunette didn’t like to bother friends and family to babysit very often if she could help it. She knew there was no way around it, but she was careful not to overdo it and make somebody feel obligated or used. Well, 2022 was the year she was going to ask for lots of babysitters so she could show her sweet, kind-hearted, generous wife a good time. They had already had the best Boston Marathon they had ever shared together in April. They went to a Red Sox game and a concert in May. They celebrated together at the Pride parade in June and had gone out to celebrate with Whitney and the team after her Pillars of Excellence induction game later in June. They were hosting their group of friends for a Horribles party on July 2nd and having a big sleepover for all the little kids so they could just fall asleep after the fireworks in the backyard and then wake-up Sunday morning and spend the day at the beach together. They had their big, week-long vacation in Maine scheduled for mid-August with the Dwyers and Crosses and maybe Flanagans and they were both really looking forward to that. And something she knew would make her keeper happy was Meg coming up for the entire month of August this summer. In addition to all of that, the brunette had one big surprise for the love of her life and she sprang it on her during the FIFA off-week in the middle of July so Ashlyn wouldn’t have to miss any of her NWSL interviews.

Of course keeping the trip a surprise wouldn’t really work now that they had children. They had to prepare Drew and Josie for the week-long change in their routine. But Ali wasn’t giving up without a fight. She refused to tell her wife where they were going and she was very careful as she answered Drew’s myriad of questions about their trip to keep her replies as vague as possible. Deb and Mike were staying at the big old house for the week and Ken and Vicki and Whitney and Ryan were helping with the kids and dogs while Ali and Ashlyn were away. It felt like a lot to ask of their village and Ashlyn balked at it when Ali told her about it the week before.

“But Al, I just don’t think now’s a great time. I mean, I just retired, we’re not sure what’s going to happen with my endorsements...”

“Well, that’s too bad because we’re not cancelling the trip. It’s non-refundable and we’re going and it’s going to be great” Ali tried to reassure her anxious wife.

“But, why?” the keeper looked curiously at her brunette and cocked her head to the side a little bit. “I’m retiring, not dying...”

“Don’t even joke” Ali gave her a stern look and leaned over in their bed to kiss her cheek. “We’re going because I want to do something nice for you, because you deserve it and because I love you.”

“It just seems like such a lot to expect your mom to run everything...”

“Ashlyn, when was the last time we went on a vacation?” Ali quirked her eyebrow at her wife.

“We were just in Florida for Christmas” the keeper countered.

“No, I mean just the two of us?”

Ashlyn had to take a minute and think about it, which was really the answer right there, but she was determined.

“We went to the Bahamas for that long weekend when you were pregnant with Josie, last March. So almost a year and a half ago.”

“Yep. Sixteen months. That’s not bad. And how about the last time we took a whole week together and went away?”
Ashlyn squinted as she worked her brain hard for the answer.

“Is it?” she looked at Ali with wide eyes. “The last real, more than a long weekend away, vacation we had was our honeymoon? When you were pregnant with Drew?”

“MmmHmm” Ali nodded seriously and took her wife’s hands in hers.

“But that was 3-1/2 years ago!”

“I love our kids and our family just as much as you do Ash, but we need to get away for a little vacation, just the two of us. It’s important sweetheart.”

“I’m so sorry Al” the keeper shook her head and looked pale and upset. “I can’t believe we let that much time go by. I just...I can’t believe it” her eyes were wide and distraught as she looked at her sweet wife who was smiling softly at her.

“Well, we had a lot going on and I don’t have any regrets. We’ve got two kids now and a business to run and a pretty awesome soccer career just ended. We’ve been busy” she chuckled and was relieved to see the blonde’s face start to come out of its’ upset frown. “So we’re going on vacation. We leave early Saturday morning and I don’t want to hear any more complaints...”

Before she could finish, Ashlyn had pulled her in for a deep, passionate kiss that they both melted into. Ali smiled as they separated a few minutes later for air.

“I love you so much baby” Ashlyn said quietly. “Thank you.”

The 5am departure time Saturday morning was brutal but they had a flight to catch and they couldn’t miss it or they wouldn’t make the tiny puddle jumper plane they had to take to get to their final destination. Just as Ashlyn had only been able to keep Ali’s birthday trip to Bermuda almost five years ago a secret until they got to their departure gate, the jig was up as soon as the keeper saw the ‘Liberia, Costa Rica’ destination at their gate. The puddle jumper that would take them from the airport in Liberia to the tiny airfield in Tambor, on the Nicoya Peninsula, only left once a day and not at all on Sundays so there was no messing around with the schedule.

“Are you freaking kidding me?” the blonde asked excitedly as they sat and waited to board the plane that morning. “Honey, this is amazing!”

“Do you like it?” Ali grinned back at her adorable wife. “The surfing is supposed to be really good now and we’re staying on the Pacific side, on the Southern end of the Nicoya Peninsula...” she looked down to pull out the literature on the resort she had booked.

“No way! That’s where Jules goes, and Tom Brady and his family!”

“I know” the brunette giggled. “I talked to Julian about it and he told me where to go and how to fly in. He was great. He told me the best place for you to hire a guide and rent a surfboard too. I hope that’s ok” Ali spoke nervously for the first time. “Everybody I asked said it wasn’t worth it to fly your board down. Half the time the airline loses it or breaks it and both Julian and your brother said renting one would be just fine.”

“Baby, you did awesome” Ashlyn wrapped her wife up in a big hug and kissed her cheek. “I can’t believe you did all of this. Thank you so much.”

The puddle jumper landed, on time, at just after 5pm that evening and they were happy to see the car from the resort waiting for them with the name ‘Krieger’ printed on the small sign in the driver’s hand. An hour later they arrived in the small town of Santa Teresa and checked into their room at the
The first thing they learned was that you didn’t get anywhere fast in Costa Rica. The roads weren’t great and nobody was in any kind of a hurry, ever. And neither woman could have cared less. They were on vacation and slow-moving roads weren’t going to bother them that week. They had seven nights in a beautiful room in a luxury resort right on the beach to enjoy. Ali had fought all of her planning urges and left everything up to her wife to decide once they arrived. When they got up to their room there was a bottle of champagne on ice waiting for them with a note from Julian Edelman telling them not to do anything he wouldn’t do. They popped it open, ordered room service because they were starving, and toasted.

“Here’s to my beautiful, thoughtful, sweet wife” Ashlyn raised her glass and was surprised at how emotional she was as she looked into whiskey colored eyes full of love. “I can’t believe we’re here and I can’t wait to spend every minute with you. I love you.”

For the first time ever, they were on a vacation and neither of them was pregnant or recovering from childbirth or rehabbing an injury of some kind. When they pulled out all of the brochures later that night, after dinner and naked dessert, they were both excited to be able to take the zip-line canopy tour and go horseback riding on the beach and ATV’ing in the jungle. Those were all things they had wanted to do together on their trips to Hawaii and Puerto Rico and they were not letting the opportunity get away this time. Ashlyn wanted to call downstairs and get a bunch of excursions scheduled with the concierge but Ali stopped her.

“Just wait babe” she pleaded. “I want you to get your surfing trips scheduled first. Then we can work the rest of this stuff in.”

“But Al, that’s what’s so great about this spot” she explained enthusiastically. “I can literally go out onto the beach right here and surf anytime I want to. We don’t have to rent a boat and plan a whole day out to get to the waves. They’re right fucking here.”

The brunette was relieved because that was what her research had told her, and what Julian Edelman had confirmed for her, but she was still skeptical. It just sounded too good to be true. It had been overwhelming at first when she tried to figure out where to stay. There were dozens of beaches on both the Pacific Ocean side of Costa Rica, where they were, as well as on the Caribbean Ocean side and transportation to and from them wasn’t always easy.

“But I want to make sure if there is another beach here that you want to surf that we make that happen” Ali urged. “I know they’re all different but I didn’t know enough...”

“Honey” Ashlyn kissed her wife and grinned. “You did fucking great. I’m not kidding you. This is absolutely perfect and I love it. I’m not looking for any hardcore drop-ins” she chuckled. “I promise.”

“You have to promise me that you’ll do what you want to do babe. This vacation is for you and I want to hang out with you while you have fun.”

“Will you surf with me?”

“I’d love to, but I don’t want to slow you down...”

“Yes! Oh I’m so happy honey” the keeper kissed Ali again. “This is gonna be so awesome!”

By the time their week was over they had taken the zipline canopy tour, gone horseback riding, gone on the ATV excursion, paddleboarded, snorkeled, canoed through an Eco tour, gone on a fishing charter, taken a guided nature hike and enjoyed several different spa treatments. And, of course, they had surfed. Ashlyn surfed every single day and Ali joined her for at least part of every day. When
she got tired or frustrated she would sit on the beach and watch her gorgeous blonde work her magic on the waves. It had been a perfect week. They were so tired after their long, active days that they could barely keep their eyes open after dinner. There were three different restaurants at their resort and they tried them all. They went dancing one night in one of the clubs in the next town up the beach but they hadn’t felt very comfortable as a lesbian couple there. Their resort was wonderful but it was located in a part of the country that wasn’t as populated as some of the other vacation spots they had visited together. They didn’t feel unsafe, but they didn’t want to push their luck either. It was just as well. They enjoyed spending time together in their room even more.

Their typical evening would include a delicious dinner at one of the resort restaurants and then a walk on the beach, or through the butterfly garden, followed by a massage for whoever’s muscles were aching the most on any given night. They didn’t have as much sex as either of them thought they would. But they both understood it was mostly because they ran themselves ragged during the day and were just too tired by the time they got back to their room after dinner and whatever stroll they took. They started out strong, having sex three of their first four nights but then only managing one more sexcapade over the final three nights. Sometimes they fell asleep and then woke up in the middle of the night to enjoy each other’s flesh. They weren’t fussy and they weren’t on a schedule. The couple was as intimate as ever though, whether they had sex or not. It seemed a little silly, but they were both thrilled to sleep naked each night, wrapped up in each other’s arms. It was the little things like that, and showering together every chance they got, that gave them great joy. They didn’t have to worry about getting up with a baby or a toddler in the night. It was so freeing to be able to have sex and fall asleep without having to stress about remembering to put their pajamas back on again or unlock the bedroom door. Or to have sex and be as loud as they wanted.

What they did more than anything though, was talk and laugh with each other. Whichever excursion they were on involved a drive to and from the location and, often, some downtime during the activity. They held hands, sat close together and shared their thoughts and fears and wonders about whatever it was they were about to do. They joked and teased and cracked each other up and held one another when something moved them, like the hidden waterfall on the nature hike or the small family of little ducks that they discovered on the other side of the butterfly garden. By the third night they were as relaxed and at ease with each other as they had ever been in their entire relationship and it felt wonderful. There was no bartering or bickering or frustration because they both were just so happy to be there together that nothing could ruffle their feathers. Even Ali just shrugged her shoulders and smiled when the paddleboard people admitted to overbooking their group so there weren’t enough boards to go around. The brunette just looked at her wife and asked her when she wanted to come back and that was that.

They tried to Facetime with the kids, and a grown-up, before they went to dinner each night but sometimes a phone call in the afternoon did the trick. As the week progressed they started to spend more time talking about real life and some of their responsibilities waiting for them back home. Ashlyn told her wife that her leg finally felt good again and confessed to being nervous about surfing on it at first. She talked about wanting to bring Fred with her to visit some veterans who were suffering from PTSD and how Mattie was helping her find a good way to do that. The keeper finally told Ali about the Academy and her shared dream with Whitney of setting up a girls-only soccer camp after she had the baby, hopefully. And she told her she wanted Sydney to be a big part of it and maybe run it for them. She wanted Niki and Ali’s dad to participate too.

“What about me?” Ali asked in a lazy voice as she played with the tattoos on the back of her wife’s right leg.

The keeper had gotten Josie’s name added to the schooner tattoo and Ali couldn’t stop looking at it whenever she saw her wife’s bare leg. Something about seeing her daughter’s name permanently
inked down the foremast, the shorter mast towards the front of the ship, made her believe in miracles even more. ‘Josephine Marie Krieger 6/19/21’. Josie had earned every one of those letters and Ali was proud of her strong little girl.

Ashlyn was sprawled out on her stomach, naked, and the brunette was resting her head on her bare ass, looking down those long legs as she spoke. “Or do you have to be a high school coach?”

“I’d love you to be a part of it” the keeper answered. “Are you kidding?”

“You don’t have to say that just to save my feelings” Ali chuckled and pressed a kiss into an ass cheek.

“I’m not honey, I swear” Ashlyn replied. “I just...don’t want to push you into anything you don’t want to do, like I did last time.”

“Ash, I told you that was the best thing that could have happened to me” her voice was soft and tender. “Helping at your camp made me realize I still loved soccer as much as ever and that I had a lot of work to do to get through all my crap so I could share it with you.” She was quiet for a minute. “I’ve always wanted to share soccer with you, somehow.”

“What do you mean?” the blonde looked over her shoulder but could only see the back of her wife’s head.

“Well, it’s just that soccer was my whole life for, pretty much, the first 19 years of my life” she explained carefully. “At my core, I still feel like a soccer player. That never really left me. I ran from it because it was too painful and I squashed it down so I didn’t have to feel any of that pain. But, I don’t know, it’s just part of who I am. A big part.” She waited for Ashlyn to say something but the blonde stayed quiet, just listening to her wife’s words. “Syd always says she still starts to introduce me to somebody new as a soccer player” she giggled. “Like, she’ll introduce me and then the first thing she wants to tell them about me is what a good defender I am.”

“And I never saw you that way” Ashlyn spoke slowly, starting to understand.

“Well, no” the brunette shrugged her shoulders. “But how could you? I was a sales rep for windows and doors when you met me.”

“I would love to have you be a part of the Academy baby. Nothing would make me happier” she grinned and looked at her wife, happy Ali turned her head to face her finally. “And I want to play soccer with you, soon.”

They were sad when it was time to leave their fantastical vacation. It really had felt almost otherworldly most of the time. But they were amazed to learn how much they were both looking forward to going back home. They missed their kids, a lot. As they sat together on the plane headed for Boston, they talked quietly about the latest report they had gotten from Deb and the one before that from Vicki. Josie had a little cold but was doing fine and Drew had somehow managed to clog the toilet in the kids’ bathroom. Ken had tried his best to fix it but they had finally called George the builder who got the plumber to come over and take care of it. The mystery of the missing plastic checkers was solved at the same time and both moms chuckled and rolled their eyes. They lifted the armrest and tucked it up between the seat backs so they could snuggle close together. They held hands and Ali leaned her head against her wife’s shoulder. Ashlyn rested her head back against the brunette’s and they drifted off to sleep, dreaming of surfing and ziplines and wet checkers and their kids and their big old house up in Gloucester.
Things had finally calmed down at Knight-Harris by the end of June. The media frenzy around the dirtbag sports agent who got dropped like a hot potato by his firm when a young WNBA player came forward with evidence of sexual harassment and client neglect and misrepresentation. K-H had taken some hits and lost a few clients. But they had also seen an influx of new clients and agents, all eager to work with the primarily women-owned and run company. The men who worked for K-H and were represented by K-H were in kind of a tough spot, at least for some of them. They either had to come out and support the firm or support Christian Agnew. The handful of male athletes that Agnew represented left the company and that was a big blow because they were up and coming NBA players who would have earned K-H a lot of money in the next five years or so. But the number of male athletes who were recently retired or weren’t represented by K-H and had come out in support of the firm was staggering. Julian Edelman, Tom Brady and several of the Patriots had led the charge. But guys like Kobe Bryant, Charles Barkley, Stephon Curry and LeBron James all made a point to throw their support behind Kamala Pierce and K-H as well. It was an eye-opening experience for everybody and, aside from the discomfort that Kamala had endured while working with Agnew, it had turned out to be a very good thing for the company. K-H now had more than a few big-name NBA clients and NFL clients who brought their big, fat contracts to the growing company.

Ali was sensitive to what Kamala had gone through and what she had, ultimately, done for her business and wanted to make sure to pay the young woman’s bravery, honesty and integrity back. She had had to argue with her fellow shareholders to make it happen but Ali arranged to have K-H represent Kamala Pierce at a discounted rate for as long as she stayed with the firm. Ali told her point blank that she hoped that would be forever, during and after her WNBA career. It was that gesture of goodwill and appreciation and decency that finally convinced Kamala’s difficult mother to get back onboard the K-H train. She had been staunchly and stubbornly unwilling to endorse her daughter’s choice to remain with the firm throughout the whole process. And Agnew’s lawyers made hay with that little bit of information. Nobody talked about the fact that the woman was one of the most difficult, horrible human beings Ali had ever come across in her life and there was no way to get that part of the story out there without looking terrible doing it. Ali had been stuck, again, at the mercy of awful Mrs. Pierce. So it was a big deal when she accompanied her daughter to the K-H offices that July afternoon to sign the last of the official documents agreeing not to pursue any future legal action against the firm itself for Agnew’s actions. She was also signing a new, extended contract with K-H that reflected Ali’s new financial arrangement.

“Hi Kamala” Ali smiled warmly as she greeted the young woman stepping off the elevator. She shook her hand and then hugged her. “Thank you for coming in today. I know you’re busy.”

“It’s lucky there’s a home game tonight” Mrs. Pierce stated bitchily as she followed her daughter into the nearby executive conference room on the fourth floor.

The woman wasn’t much older than Ali, maybe 40 years old, and she was the typical girl who had gotten pregnant too young, made mostly terrible choices after that and had grown up to be a bitter,
bitchy, distrustful and overbearing mom. Kiki Pierce was as tough as nails but not smart enough to know when she didn’t have to be that tough. She thought everybody was out to get her because her daughter was worth something. There were times when they were first negotiating Kamala’s contract before her rookie season that Ali honestly wondered if the woman saw her talented daughter as anything other than a meal ticket. The brunette knew, being a mother herself, that there were all sorts of complicated emotions involved and she tried her best not to judge Kiki, but it was so hard not to. Sometimes the woman came across as a tough mama bear who was just defending her cub. And other times she came across as a money-grubbing pimp who was offering her daughter up to the highest bidder.

“Hi Mrs. Pierce” Ali smiled and tried hard to keep it genuine as she shook the woman’s hand. “Yes, we finally got lucky with the schedule, for once” she chuckled amiably, trying to keep it light. “Should be a good game tonight. The Mystics are tough.”

“We’ll get em” Kamala grinned, confidently. “Nobody expects us to do well this season and we’ve got a surprise for the whole damned league.”

There were sixteen teams in the WNBA and the Connecticut Suns had just been relocated to Boston and changed their name to the Beacons two years ago. Kamala Pierce, the local superstar, had been drafted to help rebuild the team and establish and strengthen local ties to the community. She was one of the most talented point guards in the league after being drafted in the top 5 the year before. Ali wondered how much better her first season might have gone if she hadn’t had to deal with Christian fucking Agnew.

“Yes!” Ali pumped her fist. “Go Beacons!” she cheered. “I love it when people underestimate me” she grinned as she sat down in one of the plush swivel chairs next to the head of the conference table. She gestured for Kamala to sit in the power seat, at the head of the table. It was an obvious move but it never failed to work. Ali didn’t think she still needed to stroke the young woman’s ego, but she knew the symbolic position would resonate with Mrs. Pierce who took the seat opposite Ali, on the other side of her daughter. “How about you?”

“You know it!” Kamala replied with a broad smile.

They spent a few minutes doing one last review and then, just as the rising star was about to put pen to paper, her mother spoke.

“I can’t figure you out” she leaned forward and squinted at Ali across the smooth, polished table. She leaned on her elbows and pointed at the brunette as she continued, slowly and deliberately. “This just don’t make sense to me. I know I don’t have no fancy degree or none of that but this here” she nodded down at the contract in front of her daughter, “this just don’t seem right.”

“Oh mama...” Kamala groaned quietly and slumped in her chair. “We talked about this already. These are good people and I trust them. I brought you today because you said you wanted to help me celebrate putting last year behind me. I should have known better.”

“Don’t you get fresh with me” Mrs. Pierce quirked a sharp eyebrow at her 22-year old daughter.

“I’m sorry Ali...” Kamala started to apologize but her mother cut her off angrily.

“And don’t you dare apologize for me like I’m some retard relative you don’t know what else to do with!” she wagged her finger back and forth in front of her daughter and gave her a fierce look.

“It’s ok Kamala” Ali reassured her quietly and gave her a small smile before turning her attention to her mother. “I’m glad your mom spoke up. I don’t want there to be any hesitation or uncertainty
around this contract. It’s different, that’s for sure” she smiled quickly. “I know I’ve never been involved in one anything like it before.”

“See, now why’s that?” Mrs. Pierce made an accusatory face at the brunette and raised her eyebrow expectantly.

“Well” Ali shrugged, “no other company would offer a contract like this because we make very little money from it. It’s that simple.”

“Nothing on that” she gestured at the contract again, “is simple.”

“No, you’re right” Ali let a small smile grace her face. As much of a pain in the ass as this woman was, the brunette admired the way she stuck up for herself. “Look, Kamala and I have worked really hard on this whole situation and I feel very strongly about what happened to her and how she handled herself and who she is as a person. I think the world of your daughter Kiki.” Ali paused for a minute because she was starting to let her emotions take over. “She should never have had to go through what she did and I’ll take the responsibility and the guilt for that with me to my grave” her voice was low and serious and she was looking right into Mrs. Pierce’s hostile eyes. “This contract is my way of making it up to her and thanking her for being so brave and strong. It’s not simple and I had to fight with our shareholders to get them to agree to this contract.”

“MmmHmmmm” she nodded knowingly, even though she had no idea what she was talking about. “I’ll bet you did. I told you they were up to something Kamala. You can’t trust these people.”

“The truth is we don’t have to offer this contract.” Ali’s patience was wearing thin and she was trying desperately not to tell this stubborn, uninformed woman to fuck off and get out of her building. “We didn’t have to do any of the things we did for Kamala through this whole mess. We could have just let that jerk deny everything and taken his side in it and Kamala would be in a much worse position than she is right now.”

“How dare you...”

“I’m just reminding you of how the real world works when it comes to guys like him and women like your daughter. I hate it just as much as you do and that’s one of the reasons we started this company in the first place! You know all of this Kiki. I know you do.”

Ali looked at the woman and for a split second she thought she saw a smile or smirk dance across her face. Was she just messing with her? Would she jeopardize her daughter’s new contract just to fuck with her a little?

“I remember you said you would take care of her like she was your own” her words were the softest Ali had ever heard come from the overbearing woman and they stabbed at the brunette’s heart. “That’s what I remember” she leaned back in her seat, defeated and beaten and looked at her daughter apologetically.

“Kiki” Ali’s voice was just as soft and sorry. “I know I did and that’s what I’m trying so hard to do, right now.” She waited until Mrs. Pierce looked back at her again before continuing. “Let me take care of her. Please.”

There was a moment of silence that filled the room and Ali thought she might have gotten through to the woman.

“It’s a little late for that, don’t you think?” she huffed out and leaned forward again, aggressively.

Ali opened her mouth to speak but Kamala’s strong voice filled the room.
“Alright I’ve had enough mama. I love you but this is not your decision to make and I won’t have you messing it up for me. Ali has gone above and beyond to put this contract together for me and I’m signing it.”

“But baby...”

“No mama” she shook her head with a mixture of sadness and confusion. “I don’t know why you don’t understand this. I think it’s just because you don’t want to or something. Ali, and everybody here at Knight-Harris, have had my back since the very first day I came in here to tell them what Christian did. She’s right” she pointed at Ali, “they didn’t have to do that. They could have just kept their mouths shut and let him deny everything and then I’d have nothing. I’d have to go find another agency to represent me and a lot of them wouldn’t touch me with a ten-foot pole because I’m a trouble-maker who can’t keep my mouth shut. If I did find another firm to sign me I’d be getting the worst deal you can imagine and they’d expect me to be grateful that they signed me at all. That’s the reality of the way things work. It’s terrible, but it’s true.”

The mother and daughter looked at each other for a long minute and Ali could see Mrs. Pierce starting to cave a little. Her eyes weren’t so defiant and her back wasn’t quite as straight.

“But Kammy...”

“Mama, they risked everything to defend me. They lost clients and business and advertisers and sponsors and money because they told the world they believed me. You should be thanking Ali instead of giving her such a hard time. She did take care of me and that’s why I’m signing this contract. I’d be an idiot to go anyplace else.”

Kamala didn’t waste any more time trying to make her mother feel better. She picked up the pen and signed the contract as Ali started talking to Mrs. Pierce about some of their long-term plans to increase the second-year player’s visibility and sponsorship. After ten minutes there was a quick knock on the door and Ashlyn poked her head in with a grin on her face.

“There she is” she said as she opened the door and entered the conference room. Kamala stood up and gave the keeper a big hug and they did some goofy handshake they had been working on since shortly after the whole incident had begun back in the Fall.

“Sorry to interrupt” Ashlyn apologized to Ali and Mrs. Pierce, still smiling and standing next to Kamala. “I heard she was in the building and I just had to come find her. Sela and I were thinking about a couple of things...” her voice drifted off as she put her arm around the younger woman’s shoulder and walked her to the other end of the conference room to continue their talk.

Ali watched Mrs. Pierce as she observed her daughter exchanging ideas with Ashlyn about a new promotional idea they had been working on between the WNBA and the NWSL, now that the basketball team was in Boston. The older woman shook her head and chuckled as she thought about the way everybody in the building had greeted her daughter by name and with sincerity. She could see how comfortable Kamala was with these people and in this space and she had raved about how wonderful her new agent, Sela, was. She played ball in college too and knew a lot about basketball and the WNBA. Mrs. Pierce looked back at Ali and slowly nodded her head as she thought back to all of the conversations they had had before Kamala signed with K-H originally. She had been tough on the attractive brunette, really putting her through her paces and pushing her to her limits. But Ali had never lost her cool. She had also never backed down from any of the challenges either. Maybe she could trust this woman, this company, with her daughter again.

“Well I guess we’re done then” Mrs. Pierce chuckled and watched Ashlyn and her daughter talking
animatedly.

“Apparently” Ali chuckled too and shook her head as she stood up to gather the documents and make sure everything was all completed.

Mrs. Pierce stood up too and spoke in a low voice so only Ali could hear her.

“Nobody else would do this contract?” she quirked her eyebrow again but Ali could tell that her whole demeanor had changed and this was some sort of attempt to make nice or thank her or something.

“I swear Kiki” the brunette kept her voice low too. “If I wasn’t the boss there’s no way I could have gotten this done for her. I want to take care of her. I want her to get better and grow and reach her full potential so she can win championships and inspire all sorts of other little Kamala Pierces. I really do think the world of your daughter” she met Mrs. Pierce’s eyes again and paused for a second. “I hope my own little girl grows up to be as strong and brave as she is.”

//

After Meg’s visit last August and the awkward conversations they had after Kyle’s wedding, Hannah and Ashlyn had talked several times about what they wanted to do and what would be best for Meg. After a few more talks with the 9-year old, both women felt like they understood better where she was coming from. Ashlyn had been right. Meg didn’t know what to call Ashlyn or Ali or Drew or Josie and it had only become an issue when her friends started asking her about it.

‘What did you do this summer Meg?’
‘Oh I spent two weeks with my...Ashlyn and her family in Gloucester...’

She just needed the right words to use. Some of her friends had gay or lesbian parents so it wasn’t really about Ashlyn and Ali being a same-sex couple. It was a little scandalous that Hannah had been with a woman and was now married to a man again but most of Meg’s friends thought that was kind of cool if they were really being honest. But what were the right words? Ashlyn and Hannah had never married. They had lived together and were headed towards getting engaged if Ali hadn’t entered the picture. Ashlyn was definitely more than just a friend to Hannah and Meg and it seemed silly to think anything otherwise.

“It’s really your call Han.” Ashlyn had said when they had discussed it last Fall. “I just want her to be comfortable with it, whatever it is. What does Dev think?”

“Oh he doesn’t really care” Hannah sighed from her end of the phone. “He doesn’t understand why it’s an issue in the first place, but understanding the daily life of a 9-year old isn’t really his strong suit” she chuckled.

“Ok, but is he going to have a problem with whatever we decide?” the keeper asked carefully.

“No. Whatever you and I decide is what it’s going to be” she answered quickly and confidently. “What about Ali?”

“Same” Ashlyn replied. “Except she cares. You should have heard her bitch out her aunt after the wedding.”

“I wish I had” Hannah giggled.

“All Ali wants is a decision before Meg comes up in February. That’s all.”
“Well I don’t see any reason why she doesn’t call you her step-mom. I mean, that’s what you’ve always been. We didn’t get married but that doesn’t change who you are to her” Hannah spoke softly.

“Are you sure? I don’t want to take something that’s not really mine, if that makes any sense” the keeper struggled to get her concerns out.

“No, not really” Hannah laughed. “Listen, I know you’re not going to take my kid away from me Ash. If I thought that was going to happen I would have nipped this in the bud years ago. I admit, I didn’t always understand it, but you two love each other and there’s no way to say that’s not true.” She paused for a minute and her voice was even quieter when she spoke again. “Do you love her like your own?”

“You know I do Han.” Ashlyn’s voice was serious and full of emotion. “She’s had my heart since the first time I met her. I’ll always love her and protect her like my own daughter.”

“Then ok. We’ll tell her she can call you her step-mom. I already have you as an approved guardian on her health insurance” she chuckled. “You would have thought we’d have taken care of this way back then too.”

As soon as Meg had started spending her vacations in Gloucester Hannah had included Ashlyn as, basically, a second and third, after Hannah married Dev, parent. Ashlyn had permission to pick up Meg from her school and she was on the list to call in case of emergency too. They had thought of everything it seems, except for helping poor Meg put the right words to their unique little family.

“Only if she wants to” Ashlyn clarified.

“What?”

“I want to make sure she’s ok with it. She’s old enough now where I think we need to take her opinion into account.”

“Sure, of course. And if she’s got a different idea I’ll tell her I have to run it by you first before we agree to it.”

“Ok good” Ashlyn sounded nervous and Hannah called her on it.

“What’s the matter? You sound like you’ve got something else on your mind” she probed.

“We need to be careful how we explain this to her. Nothing has to change at all. She just can tell her friends that she’s spending February vacation at her step-mom’s if she wants to. Right?”

“Ash, what are you freaking out about?”

The keeper took a minute to admit her worry.

“I just don’t want her to think she has to start calling me mom or anything like that. This is all on her terms. She calls me, and Ali, whatever she’s comfortable with. Ashlyn and Ali is just fine. I don’t want her to think we’re asking her to change that.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought about that” Hannah was quiet for a minute and they listened to each other breathing and thinking. “I guess we’ll have to ask her.”

It wasn’t until later that night when Ali expanded on the conundrum.
“When you introduce her to people are you going to call her your daughter?” the brunette asked as she watched her wife moving wet clothes from the washing machine into the drier. Ali was sitting at the desk in the mudroom paying bills and had turned around in the chair to look at her keeper. “Our daughter?”

Ashlyn stood up with a handful of wet clothes and a blank look on her face.

“I never thought about it like that before.”

“Well we need to get it figured out so we don’t hurt her feelings. I agree with you. Whatever she wants is what we’ll do. But make sure you and Hannah ask her about all of the parts of this thing. I don’t want any more surprises.”

Ali’s words sounded more severe than they were intended but Ashlyn knew she was just sensitive to the situation because she always seemed to be the one that Meg sprung the hard questions on.

“Yeah, definitely” the blonde nodded. “I’ll call Hannah tomorrow and talk through this part too.”

“Are you ok babe?”

“This is why people told me I should just let her go when Hannah and I split up” the keeper swallowed and looked at her wife plaintively. “It’s hard and complicated and the only one who’s really going to get hurt is Meg. I don’t care what she calls me or if I get to introduce her as my daughter, but she will.” She looked down absently at the wet clothes in her hands. “Maybe I did make a mistake.”

“Hey, Ash” Ali got up and stood in front of her wife, touching her shoulders softly with both hands. “Just because it’s messy or complicated doesn’t mean it’s wrong.” She took the wet clothes from her keeper’s hands and tossed them into the drier, then held her hands and squeezed them so she would lift her eyes back up. “We’ve got a unique little family when it comes to Meg but it’s definitely not a mistake. We’ll get it figured out, you’ll see.”

The first step was a Facetime call between Ashlyn and Hannah where they talked to Meg about Ashlyn being like her step-mom except she hadn’t actually been married to Hannah. It was a lot for the 9-year old to take in and they ended that first step with Meg agreeing that she wanted to refer to Ashlyn as her step-mom when she was talking about her with her friends or at school. They decided that was enough until Meg visited Gloucester for her February vacation. Then she could talk with Ashlyn about the rest and make a decision in her own time. There had been lots of talking but no deciding in February. Both Ali and Ashlyn worried it was too much for the almost 10-year old but neither of them wanted to risk a repeat of the hurt and confusion from Kyle’s wedding by not talking about it. They told Meg to think about what she wanted to do, whether she wanted to call them anything different and whether she wanted them to introduce her as their daughter or step-daughter, and then let them know when she was ready.

That August, Meg was coming to spend the entire month at the big old house and everybody was excited. Ashlyn scheduled her interviews so she had Atlanta and North Carolina at the beginning of August, the 2nd and 3rd. She flew down to Atlanta for the first interview on Tuesday and then up to DC to pick up Meg. They had their very own road trip as they rented a car and drove the 4-1/2 hours down to Cary, NC the next morning. The extra stop and the drive meant Ashlyn was gone for two nights and three days instead of just one night and two days but Ali was all for it. She thought it would be fun for both Meg and Ashlyn and she was right. The keeper had a wonderful time showing Meg around her old stomping grounds at nearby UNC and Meg was more than impressed when she saw all the championship cups and awards Ashlyn’s teams had won. There was a big Championship Cup that had the MVP from each team engraved into it and Meg couldn’t believe her eyes when she
saw Ashlyn’s name on it, twice! The blonde hadn’t really thought about little Meg playing Division 1 collegiate soccer before, but the way the girl’s eyes lit up as they toured the facilities sure made her think about it from that moment on. Meg was a very good soccer player. She was still growing and was tall for her age. She was fast and coordinated and she’d always had a good right foot. She loved soccer but she loved basketball and drama club too. It was definitely something to talk about that month. At the end of their impromptu tour they ran into an old teammate of Ashlyn’s who worked in the media department for the women’s team now.

“Harris!”

“Bartok!”

“What the hell are you doing here?! We should be having some sort of epic gathering to celebrate the great and godlike Ashlyn Harris back in the house.”

“I’m doing an interview tomorrow with Sammy Mewis” the keeper explained as they separated from the hug they had shared.

“Oh right, I heard about that. The Lifetime TV thing.”

“Yes. Thought I’d come down a little early and show my buddy Meg where I played my college ball. Brittany, this is Meg. Meg, this is Brittany.”

“Nice to meet you Meg. I used to play soccer with this one back in college. She was a beast!” Brittany grinned and then turned back to Ashlyn. “We should catch up sometime. It’s been too long my friend.”

“Definitely. You at the same number?”

“Yes. Man, it’s great to see you.”

They hugged again and then the smaller woman was gone and Ashlyn and Meg were heading back to their car. It had been a long day of driving and walking all over Chapel Hill and they were both ready for some dinner and some relaxing back in the hotel room. Meg was quiet as they ate, even though they were at one of the best barbeque places in the country and she loved barbeque. The keeper thought she was just tired or maybe adjusting to being away from home and chose not to push it just yet. When they had settled in to watch a movie in their hotel room Ashlyn was surprised that the little girl had chosen the other double bed instead of coming and snuggling with her. That was definitely unusual.

“I’m going to Facetime the munchkins, you wanna get in with me and say hi?”

“No, that’s ok” Meg answered without looking up from the game she was playing on her phone.

She was ten years old now and she did enough travelling on her own that both Hannah and Ashlyn thought she should have a phone that she could use to make a phone call if she needed to. It was very basic and didn’t do much besides play a few games and allow her to call and text to a select group of numbers. Dev thought she was too young to have a phone and refused to pay for it.

When Ashlyn finished her call ten minutes later she put her phone down and asked Meg to come sit with her to watch the movie. When she refused, politely, the keeper got up and sat on the edge of Meg’s bed, right next to her legs.

“Ok, what’s going on girlie?” she patted Meg’s bare legs sticking out from her shorts and waited patiently. After a long two minutes of silence she was worried. “Come on Meg. Put your phone
down and talk to me. I know something’s bothering you and I’d like you to tell me about it.”

With a groan Meg put her phone on the nightstand between the two beds and looked shyly at the keeper. She looked like she was going to say something more than once but couldn’t get any words to come out of her mouth.

“Meggie, you can tell me anything. You know that, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Please talk to me honey. Maybe I can help.”

“You called me your buddy” she replied in barely a whisper.

Her voice was so quiet that Ashlyn had to take a minute and replay it in her head to make sure she had heard it and understood it.

“When did I do that?” she asked, genuinely confused. “I believe you, I just don’t remember doing it.”

Meg looked up at her with tears in her eyes and a trembling lip. Fuck. That was the wrong thing to say.

“Honey” Ashlyn tried to hold her hands but Meg wrapped hers around her stomach and put her chin down to her chest. “I use buddy for a lot of my favorite people. It’s just a word I use like pal or dude or princess sometimes. I didn’t mean anything by it and I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings because it’s kind of a boy word to say.”

“No” Meg sighed and closed her eyes for a few seconds. “Don’t you want me to be your step-daughter anymore?”

The sad, wounded, confused look on the sweet little girl’s face just about killed Ashlyn. She literally sucked in a breath as if someone had punched her in the stomach. She reached out and took one of Meg’s hands, pulling it carefully from her side and holding it in her hands for a minute as she took a deep breath.

“Of course I do sweetie. I love you so much Meg. I’m sorry I didn’t introduce you to Brittany as my step-daughter. We never officially decided anything. At least not that I’ve heard anyway.” She looked at the pink cheeks in front of her with tears sliding down them. “Did you decide that’s what you wanted?”

She nodded her head and sniffled. Ashlyn got up and brought back the box of Kleenex for her and sat down again while she blew her nose.

“Can you tell me what you decided? Then we can talk about it so this doesn’t happen again. Tomorrow I’ll know just how to introduce you to everybody. Ok?”

It took a few more minutes but Meg finally opened up and told Ashlyn that she did want to use those words at those times. She didn’t want to call Ashlyn or Ali anything different when they were talking to each other, but she wanted to be able to say she was Ashlyn’s step-daughter when the situation arose. The little girl hadn’t told anybody about her decision until right that moment, not sure how to bring it up before. Not even her mother.

“That’s ok Meg” Ashlyn said after giving her another big hug and enjoying the smile that was finally on her pretty face. “All I’ve ever wanted is for you to be ok and comfortable with what we have. I
“Yeah” she smiled shyly at the keeper who still held her loosely in her arms.

“So I’m your step-mom and you’re my step-daughter and that’s what you want?”

“Yeah” she nodded and smiled a real smile. “That’s what I want.”

“And what about Ali?”

“She’s my step-mom too” she looked at Ashlyn like it was the dumbest question in the world.

“Ok” the keeper chuckled. “And Drew is your step-brother and Josie is your step-sister?”

Meg nodded and rolled her eyes at the way Ashlyn was spelling everything out for her.

“What about Fred and Persey?”

“Ash-lyn” she whined and rolled over dramatically on the bed as the blonde laughed.

“Ok, ok” she chuckled some more. “Should we get your mom on Facetime and tell her the good news?”

An hour later, after talking with Hannah and getting ready for bed, the two roadtrippers got into Ashlyn’s bed together and snuggled up to watch a movie that they knew they weren’t going to make it all the way through. They didn’t care. They were both happy just being together at the end of their special day. It wasn’t until Meg had fallen asleep in her arms that Ashlyn texted Ali to fill her in. It was almost 10pm and she was hoping the brunette was still awake to give Josie her bottle.

Ashlyn: congrats! You are the proud owner of a new step-daughter! She looks just like you too. Lol
Aliebe: no way, you guys talked already?
Aliebe: and ha ha, very funny ;)
Ashlyn: ugh, I made her cry bc I told Bartok I was showing ‘my buddy Meg’ around.
Aliebe: omg that’s awful
Ashlyn: yeah, thanks for that. Lol.
Aliebe: sorry. Are you ok? Can you call me?

Ashlyn took a picture of she and Meg and sent it to her wife.

Aliebe: you’re adorable and I love you. Both of you. I miss you babe. Xx
Ashlyn: I miss you too. Send me a pic of you and your redhead. Xx
Aliebe: I will. Good job honey. I’m proud of you.
Ashlyn: hopefully tomorrow I won’t make her cry. #goals
A Good Group of Good People

Chapter Notes

I have to say it's funny that we're at this point in this story with the four couples vacationing together (I've had this written for weeks now) and in real life the Dwyers, Carrascos and Kriegers (yeah, I said it) have just spent the weekend together. Makes me happy. :)

The big multi-family vacation in Maine was a lot of fun and the Dwyers, Crosses, Kriegers and Flanagans promised to try and make it an annual event. This year it actually had to be moved to Squam Lake in New Hampshire because there had been a fire at the cottages that Molly had reserved in advance for the Maine location and two of the three weren’t inhabitable. The ever-resourceful Molly called in a favor at work and was able to get a big house on Little Squam Lake for them instead. Squam Lake was in Holderness, NH and it was a 2-1/2 hour drive north of Boston. It was most famous for being the location where ‘On Golden Pond’ was filmed and, yes, the loons and blueberries were very real. Squam Lake was huge and it had all the really expensive real estate around it. Little Squam Lake was about 1/5 the size and the real estate prices dropped accordingly. The nice thing about Little Squam was that it connected to Squam Lake so you could drive your boat or paddle your canoe or whatever sort of watercraft you were using, right from one lake to the other through a winding, little canal. Lake Winnipesaukee was where the super rich people owned their lakeside property. It was just southeast of Squam Lake and three times as big. Mitt Romney’s palatial summer home was on Lake Winnipesaukee as well as the homes of Adam Sandler, Jimmy Fallon, a bunch of big CEOs of huge companies, and several retired members of the Boston Bruins and Boston Red Sox.

The house Molly rented on Little Squam was big and designed for family vacations but squeezing all four families into it was a challenge. It was certainly not as ideal as the multiple cabins they had planned on for their Maine version of the vacation. But they made it work. Thankfully, they were very close friends. Even the Dwyers and Crosses had become close over the years and everybody loved Whitney and Ryan. It was a two-story house with a full, modestly-finished basement. There was a full bathroom on each floor, with another, full master bathroom on the second floor as well. The first floor had a big deck off the back of the house, facing the lake, with about a hundred feet of lawn between the deck and the edge of the lake. You couldn’t really call it a beach, but there was about three feet of sand before the grass started. There was a dock where the pontoon boat they had rented for the week was tied up securely, just waiting for them. There was a big living room on one side of the back of the house with an equally big kitchen on the other side. Both rooms looked out onto the lake and were the most popular rooms in the house. There was a big table that seated eight in the kitchen, right by the big windows with the beautiful view, and the living room had a huge tv mounted on the interior wall for rainy days or movie nights. There was also a small den at the front of the house that they quickly turned into a kid-free zone, just in case somebody needed a space that wasn’t sticky or smelly or wet. This also became the place where car keys and electronics were kept and charged. No kids allowed, not even Meg.

The second floor, which you accessed by the central staircase just inside the front door, had two medium sized bedrooms on one side of the house and a larger master bedroom and master bathroom suite all along the other side. Everyone decided to give Niki, Molly and five-month old baby Penny the master suite partly because Penny was the youngest and wasn’t sleeping through the night yet,
and partly because Molly was the one who had handled, by far, most of the arrangements and accommodations for the trip. Sydney and Dom took one of the other second floor bedrooms and kept nine-month old baby James with them. Whitney and Ryan took the other second floor bedroom, the one at the back of the house with the best view. If they were game enough to put up with eight kids, none of whom were their own, for their summer vacation then they deserved a room with a view. The full basement had two medium-sized bedrooms on one side of the house, a full bathroom and an open area in the middle of the large space, near the sliding glass door that led to the lake, with a pull-out couch and a normal size tv with a video game system. Most of the rest of the space, on the other side of the house, was where the lake toys and yard toys were stored.

The two basement bedrooms were set up with two sets of bunkbeds in each room. Thankfully, they were the safe kind with the bedrails on them so little kids didn’t go toppling out of the top bunk in the middle of the night. 6-1/2 year old Noah Cross took one of the top bunks, 4 years and 11 months old Cash took the other top bunk. 2-year old Evan Cross and 3-year old Drew took the bottom bunks in the ‘boys room’. The ‘girls room’ sleeping arrangements was a bit of a work in progress that took two nights to get finalized. The final iteration was one of the bunk beds was moved just outside the bedroom into the quieter section of the main room so there was room for Ashlyn and Ali to sleep on the air mattress they had brought from home. They had tried sleeping on the pullout by the sliding doors but it was unbelievably uncomfortable when used as a pullout. One person could sleep on the couch just fine and several members of the group napped there quite comfortably during the week. The air mattress took up almost all of the available floor space in the bedroom so they had to stand it up during the day when they weren’t using it. Ali thought her wife was going to have a conniption because it was impossible to keep the sheets ‘clean’ when the mattress was being moved twice a day every day and knocked over who knows how often. But the keeper survived, equating the experience to camping and lowering her high standards for the week. 10-year old Meg started out on the top bunk of the bunk beds that stayed in the room and they set 14-month old Josie up in a makeshift crib on the bottom bunk.

“Meg you can sleep wherever the heck you want ok honey?” Ali explained after they had moved the second bunk bed out and gone to the air mattress for night two. “I made up the bunk bed just outside the room too in case you want to get some privacy or if Josie wakes up too much and keeps you awake. You can also sleep on the couch. Ash says it’s really comfortable as long as you don’t use it as a pullout” she chuckled and so did Meg. “We’d love to have you with us in the ‘girls room’ but I know it’s tough with Josie so don’t feel bad if you want to sleep somewhere else.”

Poor Meg ended up sleeping in a different place almost every night, including both couches upstairs in the living room and one night on the air mattress with Ashlyn and Ali. The good news was that everyone was so tired out after their big days on the lake that they managed to fall asleep no matter where they were. Nobody knew how Whitney and Ryan slept at all in the madhouse full of eight children, six of whom were under the age of five. The secret was earplugs. And the Flanagans were just as exhausted as everybody else once 9pm rolled around. The daily routine consisted mainly of a good, hearty breakfast and then out the door they went. Two people stayed behind to clean up breakfast and everybody else either got on the pontoon boat for the rest of the morning or splashed around by the dock until it was time for lunch. After lunch the nappers went down – Evan, Drew and Josie. Baby James and baby Penny napped almost as much as they were awake so they didn’t count.

Meg, Noah and Cash were the big kids and they got to go out for the all-day pontoon boat trips a few times that week. Niki and Ashlyn were in charge of the pontoon boat so one of them had to be on it whenever it was away from the dock. It was part of the rental agreement. They would pack a big cooler with sandwiches and snacks and drinks and bring a big bag of sunscreen, bugspray, hats, sunglasses, towels, and extra towels, and another bag full of life vests, and then spend the whole day out on Squam Lake. There were a few places you could dock that had bathrooms and there was a
general store on one of the islands on the lake you could stop at if you needed to. They dropped anchor and swam in the lake, enjoyed jumping contests off the side of the boat and other simple activities that were so much more exciting because they were happening from a boat. There were four full-day pontoon boat rides and they were amazing. They brought a couple of tubes you could float on, tied up behind the pontoon, and those were very popular with everybody, grown-ups included. Dom had the best nap of his entire life in one of them one afternoon. They even tried bringing the little kids, not the babies, out on one of the full day trips but only Drew and Evan made it. Josie got too hot and bored and frustrated so they had to bring her back. Ali, Sydney and Molly sat on the deck with their little ones and had a fine time of their own. Ashlyn and Whitney took Meg to the movies one night, and Ali and Sydney took her shopping with them one afternoon. There were soccer games at some point every day and even the bigger kids got involved. There was one rainy afternoon and they hung out in the house and watched a movie together and ate popcorn, and then played checkers and card games.

Niki and Molly had friends up in the area and they brought their motor boat one day and took everybody tubing and wakeboarding around Little Squam lake. Both Ali and Ashlyn took a turn with Drew on the tube, knowing Niki’s friend would go easy on them with the toddler. It was probably everybody’s favorite day on the water and they stretched it out as long as possible. Ali and Ashlyn didn’t even make Drew nap that day. They took pictures of him falling asleep in his mac and cheese at dinnertime and then carried him down to bed at 6pm. It was worth it though to see his face and hear his squelches of delight when he rode on the tube. He loved it. Every night after dinner they went outside, slathered in bug spray, and sat around the campfire and roasted marshmallows and made s’mores.

The grown-ups went on their own date nights. There were seven nights and four couples so everybody got to go out twice but Whitney and Ryan who graciously offered to take the hit. Everybody appreciated it and told them so repeatedly. There were several other towns around that they could drive to for dinner or to see a movie or just to hang out at a bar and relax with other grown-ups for a few hours. There were romantic strolls down quiet little main streets after dinner or even back around the lake, just not right by their house. The grown-ups who stayed at the house and put the kids to bed had lots of fun of their own if they weren’t too tired. The adult beverages came out and the grown-up games made their appearances and loud, boisterous laughter always came next. It was such a good group of friends and they all trusted each other with their kids. That didn’t always happen in life. You could be good friends with somebody and then be horrified when you saw the way he or she spoke to their child when something went wrong. Not with this group. Niki, Sydney and Ashlyn were the most laid back in terms of the kids. If something happened and a child was crying they would just calmly handle it. They weren’t as hover-y as Molly, Dom or Ali. But even those three weren’t hyper-vigilant anymore. They all paid attention to their kids but they had also all learned the hard way that you can’t watch them every second of every day. Plus there were enough older kids that you could usually get the straight story about how the jar of jelly ended up on the wall of the bathroom or how the rocks from the edge of the lake made their way into Evan’s bed.

“How are we going to pick godparents for our next baby?” Ali whispered to Ashlyn late one night towards the end of the week. They had been talking about how awesome the vacation was and how incredible their friends were as they snuggled close together on the air mattress. “I really want Whit and Ryan to be next but I feel terrible already that Kyle isn’t the godfather to either of our kids yet.”

“I know” Ashlyn agreed and kissed her wife’s head as it lay on her shoulder. “I feel guilty that Chris and Beth are Drew’s godparents but they’re so far away. And Whit’s helped us so much with both kids. I don’t know what to do either.”

“I think it has to be Whitney and Ryan next. We told them all the very first time that it was in order of who asked us to be godparents first, right?”
“Yeah, but neither Whit nor Kyle have kids...”
“I know, but Whit and Ryan got married first and we can use that as part of our reason.”
“That seems like a reach hon” Ashlyn chuckled.
“Well I don’t know what else to do and it’s starting to bother me.”
“Let’s just spend our worrying on getting me pregnant before we go thinking about anything else.”
“You’re right babe. You’re right” Ali tilted her head up and waited for her keeper to kiss her lips.
“Maybe we just make them both the godparents?”
“You mean Whit and Kyle, but not Ryan and Nathan?”
“Yeah. People do that all the time.”
“People also sometimes have two sets of godparents. Maybe that’s what we do and then everybody’s included.”
“That might work too” Ali considered it and then yawned. “Alright, let’s just keep thinking about it – not worrying, just thinking.”
“Good plan baby.”

That air mattress was noisy as hell. If you rolled over it sounded like all eight kids in the house had just marched across it and used it as a trampoline. There was no chance for any sexy times that week with those sleeping arrangements, unless you were Whitney and Ryan. Although Ali was sure Sydney and Dom had used the den for sex one afternoon. Ashlyn and Ali had gotten a little carried away one night after everyone in the basement was asleep but they heard Meg yawn from the bunk bed just outside the door and knew that if they could hear that then she could hear what they were doing. On their second date night they were just going to head back to the house after dinner but decided to spend a little time making out once they got back to the truck. One thing led to another and they found themselves wet and horny as hell in the well-lit parking lot behind the restaurant. They felt like desperate teenagers and giggled and groped their way to what sounded like a great idea at the time.

“What’s a place with lots of other cars but not many people going in and out of them?” Ali asked as they panted for breath with their hands under each other’s shirts and their lips red and swollen.
“A parking garage” Ashlyn offered quickly. “Oooh, the movie theater!”
“You’re a fucking genius” Ali groaned as they kissed again and Ashlyn started the truck’s engine.

It was a good plan and they were inconspicuous in a sea of other parked vehicles. It was one of those small-town movie theaters where only one movie was showing so there was no reason for anybody to be coming or going during the movie. They parked in the darkest area they could find a spot and, just to be safe, they got out and climbed into the truck bed. Ali felt like nobody would look in there whereas somebody might look into any of the windows of the cab of the truck and see them. It smelled a little bit like the dogs, even though Ashlyn had washed the interior before they left for vacation and packed it to the gills. It was stuffy in there too and Ali asked her sweet wife to open the side sliding windows just a little bit each so they could get some air. It wasn’t a full-length truck bed because Ali had the double cab with the backseat so they couldn’t stretch their legs out all the way, but that didn’t bother them a bit. Neither of them knew when the movie had started but it was just about 8pm and they figured a 7pm or 7:30pm movie wouldn’t get out until 9pm at the earliest. If they
hurried they could be gone before anybody even knew they were there. They took their clothes off as quickly as they could in the dark, cramped space. Ashlyn elbowed the brunette in her breast, hard, when she tried to get her shirt off.

“Ow! Fuck.”

“Damn, I’m so sorry baby.”

As the keeper leaned over to check on her wife, Ali’s knee came up and caught her right in the cheek as she tried to get her stretchy pants off.

“Shit!”

“Oh my God, I’m sorry Ash, are you ok? Was that your face?”

They tended to their wounds and giggled their way out of the rest of their clothes, wondering if it was worth the effort. But all it took was another deep kiss and just a little contact with some bare skin and they were right back where they had been behind the restaurant. It was definitely not their sexiest or most romantic encounter but they exchanged orgasms and enjoyed the illicit nature of the semi-public sex more than they thought they would.

“Who knew this could be so fucking hot?” Ali asked breathlessly as her wife climbed up her naked, still-twitching body.

It was hot in there and they were both sweating and wishing the windows were open more.

“You’re always fucking hot Al” the keeper husked out, still turned on and practically fucking her wife with her eyes again. “When are you ever going to realize that?”

“Mmmmm, well when you put it that way” she smirked and reached down for the blonde’s tight little ass, squeezing it and moaning into her neck.

They were just about to start an unexpected round two when they heard laughter and then voices. They froze for a second as they tried to figure out which way the voices were headed. Maybe it was somebody cutting through the parking lot on their way through town? Ashlyn crawled to the end of the truck so she could see better.

“Shit” she started tossing clothes towards the brunette. “The movie’s out and everybody’s coming back to their cars right now.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Ali’s voice rose as panic flooded her system. She sat up quickly and hit her head on the roof of the cap with a bang. “Ow.”

“Shhhh” Ashlyn hushed her as she blindly felt around for the rest of their clothes and then crawled back up towards her wife and the safety of the darkest part of the truck bed. “Are you ok?” she whispered?

“Yeah, I’m fine, except that I’m naked.”

They looked at each other in the darkness, faces only a few inches apart, and were silent for several seconds. Then Ali started to giggle. And then Ashlyn joined her, mixing her giggles with more hushing sounds. The voices and other laughter were getting louder and they could hear car engines coming to life on the other side of the parking lot.

“Shhhh...if we’re quiet they’ll never know we’re in here and it won’t matter that we’re naked” the
keeper reasoned logically.

“Ok, ok” Ali agreed. “Just don’t look at me and maybe we won’t crack up again” she whispered hopefully but had to stifle a giggle as soon as the words left her lips.

They stayed still for a few more minutes and listened to the voices get louder and closer. They both sucked in a breath when they heard car doors opening and closing all around them. Ali was still sitting up on her butt, slightly hunched, in the middle of the truck bed. Ashlyn was on her hands and knees right next to her with her butt facing the back of the truck. Neither one of them was breathing at that moment. Just when they thought the voices and car doors all around them couldn’t get any closer or louder, car engines right next to them and behind them roared to life making Ali jump and giggle again, softly. In the next instant, the headlights came on in the car parked behind them and the back of the truck was washed in light.

“Shit!”
“Fuck!”

They both flattened themselves to the bottom of the truck bed as fast as humanly possible. It was a miracle they didn’t knock each other out, they dropped so quickly. The adrenaline was racing through both of them and their breathing was fast and labored. Ali was flat on her back with her arms across her chest and Ashlyn was flat on her stomach with one arm protectively across her beautiful wife’s stomach and crotch. More headlights came on and cars started backing out of spaces and driving away. It was an excruciating fifteen minutes before they felt like they could take the chance and start pulling some of their clothes back on, while remaining as flat as possible. They waited for another fifteen minutes after that before Ashlyn, now clothed to the best of her ability, crawled to the back of the truck again to scope things out. It wasn’t until they were safely back inside the cab and driving out of the parking lot that they busted out laughing again. That would go down, for sure, as one of the funniest evenings they had ever spent together. As they pulled into the driveway of the rental house Ali noticed the red mark on her wife’s cheek from where her knee had hit her. She felt the lump on the top of her own head from when she had hit it on the roof of the cap and she giggled again. More headlights came on and cars startedBacking out of spaces and driving away. It was an excruciating fifteen minutes before they felt like they could take the chance and start pulling some of their clothes back on, while remaining as flat as possible. They waited for another fifteen minutes after that before Ashlyn, now clothed to the best of her ability, crawled to the back of the truck again to scope things out. It wasn’t until they were safely back inside the cab and driving out of the parking lot that they busted out laughing again. That would go down, for sure, as one of the funniest evenings they had ever spent together. As they pulled into the driveway of the rental house Ali noticed the red mark on her wife’s cheek from where her knee had hit her. She felt the lump on the top of her own head from when she had hit it on the roof of the cap and she giggled again. They shared one last kiss and then walked into the house through the back, sliding door of the kitchen. It was just after 10pm and they didn’t think anybody would still be up but, sure enough, Whitney and Ryan were playing cards at the big kitchen table and Sydney was feeding James his last bottle before putting him down for the night. Whitney and Ryan looked at them, nodded and kept playing gin. Sydney eyed them as they stood there nervously holding hands in the middle of the kitchen.

“Did you have a nice dinner?” the coach asked as she looked back down at her baby.

“Yes. You were right” Ashlyn offered quickly, “that Italian place on the corner was awesome.”

“Good, good. What’d you do after that?” she asked, still focused on her baby but exchanging a quick glance with Whitney.

“Movie.”
“Nothing.”

“Yeah, we went to the movie” Ali tried not to look at her best friend because she knew she would know she was lying in two seconds flat.

“That sounds fun” Sydney was smirking now, but still looking at James as he finished his bottle. “Do anything else fun?” she asked as she picked him up and put him over her shoulder to burp him, finally looking at them both as she patted his back.
“No.”
“Not really.”

“Oh ok then” the coach smirked again. “Well ‘No’ your shirt’s on inside out. And ‘not really’ your panties are hanging out of your pocket. Just thought you should know before you try to lie to anybody else here tonight.”

Whitney couldn’t hold it in anymore and laughed out loud. Sydney joined her and so did, surprisingly, Ali. Ashlyn rolled her eyes and blushed profusely, looking down at her stupid inside-out shirt.

“Here” she said as she took a step towards the baby. “Why don’t I take him upstairs while you all have a nice laugh.”

“Oh hell no” Sydney gave her a disgusted look. “I’m not letting either one of you animals touch my child. Look at you. Who knows where you’ve been.”

Whitney roared at that and even Ryan cracked up as Ashlyn turned on her heel and left the room muttering something none of them could understand.

“I’m going to take a quick shower while you put him down” Ali giggled. “But pour me a glass of wine and I’ll tell you all about it.”

“Oh I’ll be here honey” the coach grinned. “Something tells me this is a good one.”

It had been one of the most perfect weeks any of them had ever spent and they were all sad to see it end. But Saturday morning came and they struggled mightily to get everything packed up and cleaned up and then loaded back into their vehicles for the drive home. Nobody was sure how it happened because they had eaten so much of the food they had brought up with them during the week, but they all had more stuff to pack for the ride home. It was a mystery that they laughingly debated while they pushed and pulled things into tight spaces in each car, truck and SUV. With their third child, the Crosses had purchased a mini-van and had absorbed all sorts of teasing for it. All of the other grown-ups stood there Saturday morning and started to appreciate the advantages of the larger, more spacious vehicle while Niki and Molly took turns sliding their belongings into it with little difficulty.

“You’re next, ay?” Dom smirked and whispered to Ashlyn as they watched Niki easily close the back hatch of the mini-van.

“Jesus Christ” the keeper whispered back without moving, wide-eyed and a little pale.

It was a little bit of a shitshow but both Molly and Ali really wanted a group picture in front of the lake before they left. They quickly determined that they weren’t letting any of the kids anywhere near the lake because one of them, at least, would definitely end up in it. Since they were getting into their vehicles and driving away as soon as the picture was taken, there was no way they were going to risk that. So the picture moved to the back deck and every grown up was responsible for a child. The eight to eight ratio working perfectly as they grouped together while Dom set the timer on the camera he had set up on one of the deck tables. He took one last look to make sure everybody would be in the frame and then jogged back to his spot on the left side of the group, picking up Cash as he slid into place.

Everybody was in frame but only half of them were looking at the camera. The other half were talking to children or laughing at something somebody had just said or, in Niki’s case, frowning at Penny who was wailing away in Molly’s arms next to her. The recently pregnant women all held
their youngest in their arms while some of their spouses wrangled their other child. Whitney held Drew in her arms as he grinned at the camera and Ryan had Noah Cross in front of him. Noah’s whole goal in life was to be as tall as Ryan when he grew up. He idolized the big man and had spent as much time as possible with him that week. No-one was surprised that they had paired up for the picture and Niki was relieved because she was holding Evan. Ashlyn and Ali stood next to each other, in the middle of the picture, and the brunette held a red-faced and agitated Josie as she leaned close to her wife and smiled at the camera. Sydney was on the other side of Ali, holding a sleeping baby James, and trying to soothe her goddaughter with the old tickling the bottom of her cheek trick that almost always worked. The person with the biggest smile on their face, although there were three or four pretty huge grins happening in the picture, was Meg. She was dead center in the picture and standing in front of Ashlyn, leaning back into her as the keeper draped her long arms in front of and around her. Meg had one hand up on Ashlyn’s forearm as it wrapped across her chest and a big, broad, toothy grin on her freckled face. Ashlyn was laughing. Her head was straight ahead but her eyes were closed and her mouth was open mid-laugh. Whitney, more off to the side, had her head turned towards the middle of the group and it looked like she had been the one who had said whatever had cracked the keeper up. The picture became another fast favorite and Ali made it her header picture on her social media as soon as she got it from Dom. It was a picture that all four families, even as they continued to grow and multiply over the years, would look at often and with tremendous love. What a good group of good people. That’s what almost everybody who saw the picture commented. And they were right.

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Meg’s month with the Kriegers was fun and they had made the most out of their time together. Ashlyn was especially touched by Ali’s parents making time for the girl too. Meg had always had an easy relationship with Deb, because, well, who didn’t? Deb was easy to be around and rarely in anything other than a good mood. Ali thought she was going to die the first time she heard Meg call her mother ‘Deb Deb’ a few years ago. It was one of the cutest things she had ever seen or heard. That summer, before the New Hampshire vacation, Deb had invited Meg to go with her the next day to meet her friends for lunch and a little shopping. Ashlyn was away for three days for her interviews, all the way to Seattle, Portland and Vancouver that trip, and the redhead looked apprehensively at Ali as they all sat around the nook eating dinner. Josie’s highchair was pulled up to the end of the table and Deb sat next to it on the banquette bench, monitoring the tiny finger foods the baby girl was shoving into her mouth. Ali sat in the chair across from her mother and tried to keep Drew focused on eating his dinner as he sat next to his Grandma on the banquette bench. He had a habit of slipping to the ground and escaping away from underneath the table. Ali’s position was the dinnertime version of a keeper and her goal was to stop the three-year old from running away from the table. It didn’t happen very often but Drew wasn’t a great eater and mealtimes could be a bit of a battle. Meg sat next to Ali enjoying the pizza that she still loved so much. The brunette always tried to treat her to it when Ashlyn was away.

“We’ll be back in time to go to the beach if that’s what you’re worried about” Deb added with a chuckle. “But you certainly don’t have to go. I just thought it might be nice” she shrugged. “I talk about you all the time and they’d like to meet you. That’s all.”

“You talk about me to your friends?” Meg tilted her head as she thoughtfully chewed her pizza.

“Well sure I do honey. I talk about all of my grandkids, a lot” she smiled at the girl across the table from her. “But that’s what we Grandmas do when we get together” she winked at Ali who was trying to play it cool and hide how much she was loving the interaction.

It was quiet for a few minutes as they ate and Josie’s happy gurgling and chewing filled the room.
“I used to love going to lunch with my mom and her friends when I was little” Ali added. “Especially if she was going shopping afterwards” she gave Meg a conspiratorial wink when Deb wasn’t looking. “I still do.”

That was all it took, just a little reassurance from the brunette, and Meg agreed to the lunch date the next day. When Ali came home late the next afternoon after picking up both Drew and Josie from daycare she was happy to find the big old house empty. That meant that lunch and shopping had gone well and Deb and Meg were still shopping. Later that night Ali was about to go into the front bedroom to tuck Meg into bed when she heard Ashlyn’s voice through the open door. She and Meg were Facetiming and the little girl was telling her how much fun she’d had that day with Deb Deb.

“I’m glad Meggie. You’re lucky to have a Grandma like her. Not everybody does you know” the keeper’s voice was soft and a little more serious than Ali expected it to be.

“Why not?”

“Well, some people have Grandmas who are old and can’t do very much with them anymore. Like Tiff’s Grandma, right?”

“Oh yeah, she can barely walk and she’s deaf too” Meg replied, remembering one of her best friends at home and her elderly and infirm grandmother.

“Deb Deb is the best, and not just because she can still do all sorts of stuff with you, but because she’s just...”

“Fun!” Meg finished the sentence for her with a giggle, making Ali stifle her own as she eavesdropped in the hallway.

“Yes she is” Ashlyn agreed with a chuckle.

Meg took a minute before talking again.

“She told them I was her granddaughter and everything” she finally said, in a whisper. Ali felt her heart catch and held her breath for a few seconds.

“Well that’s what you are, right?” the keeper asked carefully. They were all still trying to make sure they were honoring Meg’s wishes.

“Yup” Meg replied and her voice sounded light and happy.

“I’m glad you had a fun day baby girl, but you should get to sleep. It’s late” Ashlyn spoke softly. “Make sure you thank her again tomorrow for all the things she bought you” she reminded the girl. “I’ll see you tomorrow night when I get home. I love you Meggie.”

The next day Ali left work early and took all three kids, and both dogs, to her father’s house to spend the afternoon and evening in the pool. Ken had the day off, having just come back from a scouting trip, and was happy to see everybody. Vicki took Josie while Ali got Drew situated for his nap. When the brunette went back outside, after changing into her bathing suit, she grinned immediately when she saw her father standing in the shallow end of the pool teaching Meg how to jump out of his hands and do a backdive into the deep end. Ali couldn’t count the millions of times she had done that exact same thing with her dad growing up. It hit her hard as she realized what a rarity this scene must be for little Meg. She’d never had a father growing up and Hannah’s family, her mother, sister and brother, weren’t very supportive from everything she had heard from Ashlyn. Dev was great and took good care of both Hannah and Meg but he was definitely not a hands-on dad. Ali wasn’t even sure he would get into the swimming pool at all, forget about play with his step-daughter in it. The
brunette regretted not having the girl spend more time with her own father before then. She kicked herself for a minute and then just promised to try and do better in the future.

After a couple of hours in the pool, Ali and Josie joining them before the younger redhead’s nap, everybody got out, letting the hot August sun warm them up and dry them off. Vicki had gone into the house for something and Ken, Ali and Meg were all lying on lounge chairs enjoying the quiet.

“When will Drew be up?” Ken asked without moving.

“In about 45 minutes” Ali answered after pulling her phone out from underneath her chair. “Why?”

“That’s just enough time to go get ice cream and bring it back” he suggested with a grin. “I’ll need a helper though...”

Ali couldn’t have loved her father more. She knew what he was doing and she beamed at him as she sat up. That was their special thing, getting ice cream. He used to take Ali as his helper and they would sit and eat their own ice cream first. Then they would go back to the window and order for Deb and Kyle and bring it home for them. And the helper was always allowed to get whatever they wanted because they had been good enough to come and help. The first time Ali had ever had a banana split sundae was during one of those trips with her father. She had been about nine years old and she could only eat half of it. She looked sadly at her father who simply smiled at her and helped her finish it. Nobody ever had to know, he had said.

“I need to go get Josie up from her nap” Ali started, playing along with her dad and hoping Meg would offer to help instead.

“I can help, I think” she said in a shy voice. “What do I have to do?”

“Well, can you eat ice cream?” Ken sat up and asked with a straight face as he looked at the girl.

“That’s the most important thing right there.”

“Yup.”

“Can you help me remember what everybody likes so we can order it?”

“I think so.”

“How about holding things in your lap? Are you good at doing that? We’ll need to get the ice cream back here before it melts...”

“I can do that. For sure” she nodded enthusiastically.

“Ok then helper, you’re hired” he patted her knee and then stood up. “Let’s go.”

Late that night as Ali told Ashlyn the story from the comfort of their bed, the keeper, jet-lagged as she was, couldn’t keep the smile off of her face.

“What did she order?” she asked as she held the brunette in her arms with her head on her shoulder. “I’m sure it was something huge. I hope you gave your dad some money for whatever she wasted...”

“Ash, I would never do that” Ali shook her head. “That’s my dad’s thing. He’ll do that with all our kids and don’t you ever try to give him money for that either. It’ll crush him.”

“I just feel bad that she probably threw away half of a giant sundae...”

“My dad plans on it” Ali giggled. “He only ever gets a tiny little cone because he knows he’ll have
to help finish whatever it was that I got or Kyle got or Meg got.” She leaned up and kissed her wife’s jaw. “I always felt bad because Koty and Tanner were too big for him to do that with them. I mean, he took them for ice cream, but they just ate the big old sundae by themselves and didn’t need his help.”

“He never took me for ice cream” Ashlyn pouted, teasingly, making her wife giggle again.

“I think you’ll be ok babe” she chuckled and patted Ashlyn’s chest.

They were quiet for a minute or two, both thinking about how lucky they were and how happy they were and squeezing each other just a little bit tighter.

“I missed you so much” Ali whined softly. “How many more trips do you have?”

“Just two more in September. Maybe another one for the playoffs but I don’t know yet. It depends who makes it. We have some extras already in the can that we can hopefully use.”

They held each other for another minute until Ashlyn leaned down and kissed the top of her wife’s head.

“Can I tell you something?” the keeper’s voice was low and more serious than it had been.

“Yeah babe” Ali tilted her head back so she could see her favorite face. “What is it?”

“I really want some ice cream.”
“I can’t fucking believe it!!” Ashlyn yelled happily that morning, unable to control herself as they sat in the office at the fertility clinic. “Are you sure?” she looked almost threateningly at the doctor as she leaned forward in her seat to challenge him.

“Well, we have to wait for the second Beta test on Friday to be absolutely certain” he explained again, trying not to chuckle at the keeper’s unbridled enthusiasm. “But yes, everything indicates that you’re pregnant. Congratulations.”

Ali sat there in a state of shock. It had all happened so quickly. They had just come back from their New Hampshire vacation and Ashlyn knew she was about to start ovulating. They had agreed to start trying in September but the keeper’s monthly schedule had her ready on August 24th instead. They didn’t want to wait all the way to the end of September to start so Ali, the planner, shrugged her shoulders and headed home early that Wednesday afternoon after getting the phone call from Ashlyn. It had been almost unbearably awkward walking into the big old house. Deb and Meg were both there and the older woman was beside herself with excitement. Ali wanted to crawl into a hole when she saw the look on her mother’s face as she grinned at her from the doorway into the kitchen.

“Hi baby” Ashlyn greeted her in the mudroom with a kiss and a confused look on her face. “Why are you here? I’m just leaving to go meet you...”

“Meet me?”

“You didn’t check your texts did you?” the keeper smiled softly at her discombobulated wife. She turned her around and led her out the door towards the truck. “Thanks Deb” Ashlyn called over her shoulder to her mother-in-law. “Whitney’s on her way.”

“Everything’s fine” Deb called back from the mudroom door with a wave and a bright smile. “You two just go and have fun now. Good luck!”

“Oh my God, just kill me now” Ali muttered as she got into the passenger side of the truck.

“Just relax honey” Ashlyn started the engine and gave her wife another kiss on her cheek before backing out of the long driveway. “I got us a room at the hotel right near the clinic so we can, you know, get ready.” She wagged her eyebrows at the brunette and kept talking. “Our appointment’s at 4:00pm so we don’t have a ton of time but it should be enough...”

Ali swallowed hard and tried to snap herself out of the rushed, agitated feeling she was experiencing. She also really had to get over the fact that both her mother and Whitney knew that they were rushing out of the house to go fuck before their artificial insemination appointment. The brunette had come a very long way in terms of her comfort level around the topic of her sex life, but she still didn’t like people to know that they were about to go have sex. She didn’t mind talking about it afterwards so much, but it still made her uncomfortable to talk about it before it was about to happen. Especially with her own mother. She groaned out loud, unintentionally.

“Are you ok Al?” Ashlyn looked at her quickly as she drove. “Are you sick?”

Jesus fucking Christ! The brunette yelled at herself inside her own head. Get your shit together!! You’re about to help your wife make a baby for God’s sake. It’s not even about you!!

“I’m ok babe” she smiled shyly at the blonde and leaned over to kiss her shoulder. “I just hate the thought of my mom knowing what we’re doing” she shook her head and sighed. “But I’ll be over
that in just a few minutes, I promise” she pressed another kiss into her beautiful wife’s shoulder. “Then we can get serious about making a baby this afternoon.”

The brunette had rallied and done her part of the preparations with gusto, giving Ashlyn two big orgams and sexing her up nicely before driving her to the clinic for their appointment. Just as they had done when Ali had her IUI treatment with Josie, the fertility doctor and nurse told them they were leaving the room for thirty minutes so they could have some privacy. As soon as they were gone the brunette, still feeling a little guilty for her less than enthusiastic response at the house, took matters into her own hands and moved quickly to the end of the exam table where her wife’s legs were bent up at the knees with her feet flat on the top of the table. Ali ducked her head underneath the paper hospital gown and put her lips and tongue to work between her wife’s long legs. Ashlyn let her get started but, nervously, wanted to just have the orgasm and get it over with. It wasn’t very romantic and she didn’t want to waste time explaining it to the brunette.

“I need you up here” she begged softly as she tugged on Ali’s arm. “I can’t get out of my head and this stupid paper gown isn’t helping.”

Ali remembered when she had been in that very position and the thing that helped her the most had been Ashlyn’s hot lips on her neck and sexy words in her ear. She moved back to the side of the table and gave her wife a deep, sultry kiss before she was even done talking. She felt the blonde’s body relax into the kiss, moaning and kissing her back while Ali moved a hand underneath the noisy paper to play with her breasts. Ashlyn tensed again at the sound of the gown and Ali decided she would just have to focus on the one breast because she didn’t want to distract her keeper with the paper again.

“Just relax Ash” she purred after the kiss. “It’s just me and you babe, I love you so much” she worked her mouth across her jaw and over towards her ear. “I love your sexy body and all the things I get to do to it” she bit her earlobe lightly and saw her keeper move her hand down between her own legs. “That’s right baby, I’m right here and I’m going to make you feel soooo good...”

Ten minutes and countless filthy images that went directly from Ali’s lips to Ashlyn’s core later, the blonde came with a shudder and held her wife tightly to her chest and neck. She panted into Ali’s shoulder and placed soft kisses to her neck.

“Thanks honey, I definitely could not have done that without you” she gulped air around her words. “You made that look so easy last time...I feel really inadequate right now” she admitted with a soft chuckle.

“Listen sweetheart” Ali spoke sweetly as she moved to help her wife put herself and the paper gown back together. “You’re going to go through a million new things when you get pregnant. Just focus on experiencing them and feeling them and don’t worry about how different it is than what I experienced or felt. Patty always says that every pregnancy is different so don’t try to hold yours up and compare it to mine, ok?”

“Yeah, I know you’re right” she looked a little embarrassed.

“Don’t feel bad babe” Ali shook her head and smiled at her anxious wife. “I’m here for you every step of the way and I will answer every question you have and tell you what it was like for me. Don’t doubt that for a second” she kissed Ashlyn’s lips and caressed her cheek with her thumb. “But I just want to make sure you appreciate your own experience too. You know?”

“I do know” she nodded at her wife. “Thanks Al. I’m still a little scared” she admitted, “but the good kind and I wouldn’t want to do any of this without you right here by my side” she held the brunette’s hand and squeezed it. “So don’t leave me now, ok?”
“I’m going to take such good care of you, you’ll be sick of me before the first trimester’s up. Just you wait” Ali grinned and kissed her lips again.

The two-week wait had been the easiest of their three so far in large part because Meg and Deb were still there and their days were busier than usual. And that was just fine by them. Anything that made that horrible time go by faster was welcome. Tuesday, September 6th couldn’t come fast enough. Ashlyn was smart about not being too active during those two weeks. She encouraged Meg to play in the ocean with Ali instead, and when Deb figured out what was happening she started asking the girl to do things with her and for her instead too. After one week it was time for Meg to fly back to DC and there were tearful goodbyes at the airport. Then, a few days later, it was time for Mike to fly back to Miami when their condo rental was up at the end of August. Deb had planned to stay for another couple of weeks all along. She was going on a golf trip in Maine with two of her friends for a long, Labor Day weekend. So when they found out the good news on the 6th it was just the two of them.

“Honey, are you ok?” Ashlyn asked, still waiting for the brunette to say something after the fertility doctor’s wonderful news. She squeezed her wife’s hand that she was already holding as they sat in side by side chairs listening to the results. Ashlyn’s hCG levels were very high, higher than either of Ali’s had been at this stage during her pregnancies. It was all really good news. “Ali?”

“I...I...” she stammered as her brain started to link up with her body again. “I just can’t believe it” she finally said with a small smile that turned into a big smile and finally into a nose-crinkling grin as she met her keeper’s excited hazel eyes. “You did it! I’m so proud of you” she said as tears started to collect in the corners of her eyes.

When they left the clinic and got back to the truck they hugged each other for a long time and cried together. It was just too good to be true. Ashlyn was going to start trying to get pregnant in September and here she was already freaking pregnant on the day after Labor Day! It had just happened so damned fast and neither woman was really ready for it, if they were being totally honest. They were happy as hell, but they were terrified too because it was happening and there was no going back or getting cold feet or changing plans anymore. Baby Krieger #3 was a part of their lives now and they just had to get used to it. They took turns making the first phone calls as they drove up to Rockport for a celebratory, early lunch. They would wait until the Friday appointment to tell the rest of the immediate family. Ashlyn called Whitney first, then Ali called Sydney. It was 11am on a workday so they didn’t get either of their besties. They chimed in together on both voicemails and shared the news that way, the joy in their voices unmistakable. Ali texted her mom the good news, knowing she was either on the golf course or with her friends doing something else fun. Finally Ashlyn called Tammye and spoke with her.

“Oh Ashlyn” her mother had said in a hushed voice before going quiet for almost a full minute.

“Mom? Are you still there?” she asked and then looked at Ali. “I think I lost her...”

“I’m here, I’m here!” Tammye’s voice came from the phone the keeper had moved away from her ear in mild frustration.

“Mom, are you ok?”

“Oh honey, I’m so good. I never thought I could be this happy, baby girl. I can’t believe you’re pregnant” she paused and took a breath, “I just never thought it was going to happen...”

Ashlyn knew she didn’t mean that in a bad way. She knew she meant it just as the words had been spoken, plainly and matter-of-factly. The keeper knew this because she had felt the exact same way. For most of her 36 years and 10 months on this planet, Ashlyn had not thought she would ever be
pregnant. She had always been quick to remind her mother and Grandmother of that fact too. Anytime the topic of pregnancy or childbirth had come up in any conversation once Ashlyn had reached high school age, the keeper’s immediate response had always been... ‘well don’t look at me, I’m never having a kid’. The blonde had been reconsidering her position ever since she fell in love with Ali and it had taken her until Drew was five or six months old before she realized that she did want to be pregnant and have a baby. The keeper had had four years of gently working towards her new revelation. To everybody else, except for her super inner circle of Ali, Whitney, and Sydney, the idea of Ashlyn being pregnant was so foreign that it truly seemed surreal. She had confessed her desire to Deb in a hotel room during Championship week only because her mother-in-law had asked her, point blank. The topic had never come up between she and her own mother, because, well, why would it? She had been adamant for over twenty years that she wasn’t going to have a baby.

“Me either mom” Ashlyn’s voice hitched as her emotions flared up. “I’m so happy.”

The first fight they had about the pregnancy was the very next week. Ashlyn was supposed to fly to Chicago and then Houston for her second to last interview trip and Ali wanted to make sure she would take it easy and be good to herself and the baby. What the brunette really wanted was for her wife to cancel the damned trips she had scheduled that month and stay where she could keep an eye on her but she didn’t dare even breathe those words out loud. She knew from personal experience how trying it could be to have someone, no matter how much you loved each other, hanging over you all the time trying to make sure you were doing the right thing or not doing too many things. It could be annoying and exhausting. Ali promised herself she wouldn’t become an overbearing tyrant with her pregnant wife. But she also couldn’t help wanting to take care of the love of her life as her body started working on the miracle of life.

Ashlyn bristled at the extra concern much faster than either of them expected her to. It had only been a week but her hormones were already starting to get unruly. Both women had been the caregiver and receiver in their relationship before and usually adjusted as necessary. They were both stubborn and independent, but they both appreciated a little sweet TLC from their wife too. It was the night before the keeper was flying to Chicago and Ali was helping her pack up in their bedroom after the kids were asleep. They had already argued and made up about the trip twice in the past three days and they were both tired of talking about it and worrying about it. It was quiet in the room, but not uncomfortably so as Ali opened the suitcase on the floor by the fireplace and started to remove the airline tags and stickers from the handle that were still there from her wife’s last trip. She was already in her pajamas, hoping to get this task done quickly so they could get into bed and try connecting physically. Ashlyn had just come up the backstairs with a laundry basket full of clean clothes.

“Honey, I was going to bring those up in just a few minutes” Ali said softly and smiled at her wife. She was just trying to be sweet because she was tired of the tense dynamic between them the past two days. But Ashlyn heard nothing but criticism and correction.

“Geez Al, I’m not an invalid” she sighed heavily and rolled her eyes as she dumped the clothes onto her side of the bed and started folding them without looking at the brunette.

“I never said you were...” the brunette started cautiously. It was late and they were both tired.

“Yeah, you pretty much did” the keeper shot back with heat and a borderline dirty look.

“No, I didn’t” Ali corrected, her voice even but her back straightened and her head tilted a little as she fought to control her temper. “I don’t know why you’re having such a problem letting me help you Ash...”
She shouldn’t have said ‘problem’, she knew it as soon as she heard it leave her lips. If she hadn’t been so tired she might have been able to catch it before it was too late.

“So I’m the one with the problem?!” Ashlyn looked right at her and quirked her eyebrow. “You’re practically smothering me and treating me like a five-year old because I’m one week pregnant and I’m the one that has the problem.” She rolled her eyes again and glared at her wife before getting back to folding clothes. “Ok, whatever.”

Ali was stung by the venom in her wife’s voice and hurt by the words. She wasn’t smothering her. She just wanted to carry up the fucking laundry basket for her. What the hell was so bad about that? What was happening right now? Before she could even think about stopping herself, her next sentence was already out of her mouth. It was like some knee-jerk reaction that she didn’t have any conscious control over.

“Well maybe if you stopped acting like a spoiled brat you wouldn’t feel like a five-year old!” she spat out, bursting into angry and hurt tears as she stormed out of the room towards the front stairs.

“Good idea!” Ashlyn shouted after her. “Leave! Don’t come back tonight either. That would really help me a lot.”

It was almost midnight when the keeper finally looked for and found her beautiful brunette. She had started downstairs, expecting to find her on the living room couch, sleeping with the tv still on. But she wasn’t there. She let the dogs out and, after confirming that Ali wasn’t anywhere on the first floor, she brought them upstairs to go to bed. She quietly opened Drew’s bedroom door and Fred jumped up on the empty twin bed with a heavy sigh. She closed the door and moved down the hall to the nursery where she did the same thing so Persey could jump up onto the empty twin bed there. She closed that door and went across the hall to the guest room, and then to the front bedroom but Ali wasn’t in either bed. Ashlyn went back to their bedroom hoping she had just missed her but the room was just as she had left it fifteen minutes earlier. She climbed the stairs to the third floor, sure she would find her wife curled up on the couch in her office. She smiled as she thought about all the times she had found her napping there over the years, usually when she was pregnant and exhausted. The blonde’s face fell when she found the office dark and empty as well. Ashlyn couldn’t help the nerves that crept up the back of her neck as she officially started to worry for the first time. Was she working out in the basement? Was she that angry? She hadn’t left the house because all three vehicles were still in the driveway, Ashlyn’s Jeep, her Suburu sports car and Ali’s truck.

“What the fuck?” she said out loud and frowned as she moved back to the front stairs, about to go down to the second floor again.

Just so she could say that she had looked there, the keeper opened the door to the studio and poked her head inside. It was dark except for the moonlight that came in through the window that overlooked the ocean. She waited for her eyes to adjust and then looked around the big room. She wasn’t sure what she expected, but she gasped out loud when she saw her beautiful brunette asleep on the couch in the corner of the room. She had pulled the old afghan that Gram had made over herself and Ashlyn could see that she had been crying when she knelt down in front of her. The blonde felt terrible and fought back tears of her own at the thought of Ali crying herself to sleep up here. She didn’t know what her problem was, but she had taken it out on her wife that night for sure. These pregnancy hormones were no fucking joke. The stubborn keeper had replayed the argument as she finished folding the clothes and then finished packing. Ali hadn’t done anything but try to be nice to her and she had practically bitten her head off in response.

“Baby...” she whispered softly and put her hand on Ali’s shoulder, gently shaking her. “Al, honey, come on...wake up sweetheart and let’s go to bed now.”
It took a minute but the brunette finally woke up with a start, immediately asking what was the matter with which child. That was just a parenting thing. As soon as you had a kid it was impossible to be woken up without automatically assuming something was wrong or somebody was sick.

“Everybody’s fine” Ashlyn smiled at her and gave her a minute to breathe again and blink her eyes a few times. She watched as Ali reached to the floor and helped her by handing her her glasses. “Well, everybody except me. I’m an asshole.”

Ali pushed her glasses onto her face and put her head back against the throw pillow that wasn’t that comfortable for sleeping on. Ashlyn looked down, sorry and embarrassed, but kept her hand on her wife’s shoulder, clinging to the touch like a lifeline. The brunette wanted to just tell her keeper that it was ok and that it wasn’t a big deal and that they could just forget it ever happened. But if this was how things were going to be in week one then it was going to be a long fucking nine months. She was tired, cranky, hurt and scared and she couldn’t figure out what to say.

“I don’t blame you for being mad at me” Ashlyn continued when Ali didn’t speak. “I’m mad at me too. I don’t know what’s wrong with me honey. I’m really really sorry.” She took the brunette’s hand when she silently offered it from underneath the afghan. Ashlyn held it tightly and sat on the couch, in the space above Ali’s knees once the brunette backed herself up against the back of the couch. “I didn’t mean anything I said and I don’t know where it came from” she shook her head and found it difficult to look at the brunette so she dropped her eyes to their hands.

“Can you tell me what’s going on?”

“I have no idea” she answered honestly. “I mean, I know you don’t want me to go and I don’t really want to go, but I have to because that’s my job right now. But how that turned into me being such a raving bitch...I don’t know” she finally met Ali’s gaze. She had been afraid of the judgment or anger or disapproval she was going to see there but all she saw was love and worry. She felt like an even bigger asshole. “I’m so sorry baby.”

“It could be the hormones” Ali offered quietly as she moved her thumb across the back of her wife’s hand, soothingly. “It’s pretty early but I don’t know” she shrugged. “Maybe your pregnancy starts with really crazy hormones or something.” She paused, still watching Ashlyn’s face. “Do you feel like I’m smothering you?”

“No, I don’t” the keeper answered quickly.

“Don’t lie Ash, tell me the truth so we can figure this out. If we can’t find a way to be honest now, we’ll never make it through one month, forget about nine” she cautioned. Her voice was soft and kind though. There was nothing threatening about it. “Please honey.”

Ashlyn took a deep breath and let it out slowly before she spoke.

“I don’t feel like you’re smothering me. I was mad or hurt maybe, I don’t know, that you thought I wouldn’t be able to take care of myself and the baby on this trip.” She moved her hand to the top of Ali’s shoulder and started squeezing and massaging it. “But that’s it. And we talked about that so I don’t know what the fuck my problem was tonight.”

“You know, we’re in a pretty cool position really, when you think about it” Ali smiled at her confused and apologetic wife. “We’ve both done this before...I mean, the other person’s part. I’ve been the hormonal pregnant lady before and you’ve been the super-helpful, slightly overcautious other parent. We know what the other person is going through. We just have to remember to think
about it.”

“Yeah, we need a new rule” Ashlyn smiled ever so slightly. “No talking until we run it through our brain first for approval.” She chuckled tentatively, hoping her wife would think it was funny too. “Or maybe it’s just me. Maybe that’s a new rule for me.”

“Oh honey” Ali giggled. “This one was all you for sure, but I’m sure the next one will be me” she shook her head and smiled up at her keeper. “I like your new rule a lot. I’d like to add my own new rule too.”

“Go for it.”

“We have to remember we’re a team and we’re on the same side and we want the very same thing – which is for you and the baby to be healthy.” She took a beat before continuing, happy to see Ashlyn nodding her head in approval. “When I was pregnant and you were trying to do things for me and help me, sometimes I would get frustrated and it helped me to remember that. Sometimes I said it out loud” she chuckled.

“When was it frustrating?” the keeper asked, looking crushed by the admission.

“Babe, don’t worry about it now and wonder what or when or anything like that. I probably couldn’t give you an example right now anyway. But when you’re seven or eight months pregnant and your body feels like a stranger and you can’t get it to do anything you want it to do, or fit anywhere you need it to fit, you’re going to get frustrated. At everything.”

“Oh.”

“Aw sweetheart, it’s ok to be scared” the brunette sat up and pulled her nervous wife into a hug. “I’d be worried about you if you weren’t. But you’re going to do great. I know you are. So anytime you start to feel nervous about something just tell me and I’ll remind you what a rock star you are and how great you’re going to be as a pregnant lady.”

Ali tried to pull back so she could look at her keeper’s face but Ashlyn held on tightly and wouldn’t let her go. The brunette smiled softly and moved her hands all over her keeper’s strong back, making slow, soothing circles across the back of her sleep t-shirt. They stayed like that for a few minutes and Ali was just about to suggest that they go to bed when she heard her wife’s small, frightened voice.

“I’m terrified I’m going to lose the baby...like Syd.”

The brunette felt her chest clench when she heard the fear in Ashlyn’s voice. She waited a few seconds to make sure her own voice wouldn’t give her away and then spoke, sounding much braver than she really felt.

“I’m afraid too. I won’t pretend I’m not. But all that does is make it harder for you to take good care of our baby.” She kissed Ashlyn’s neck and kept on hugging her. “We’ll do it just like last time. We’ll be strong and brave and we won’t let it get to us or worry us. And then, when one of us can’t be strong anymore or needs a break, we’ll talk about it some more and chase it away again. Ok? Just like last time.”

The fear of having a miscarriage was something none of their group would be able to escape again. Ali, Ashlyn, Whitney, Ryan, Molly, Niki and, of course, Dom and Sydney and had lived with it as something in their world that did happen, not just could happen. It had happened. It was like in college when Whitney’s roommate, before Ashlyn, had been raped. That whole group of friends was changed forever because rape became something that did happen instead of just something that could
happen. 1 in 6 pregnancies ended in miscarriage. It was a ratio they all knew by heart and hated. Evan, Josie, James and Penny had all been born after Sydney’s miscarriage and that only added to the pressure they all felt. If you added Noah, Cash and Drew to the count they were fucking overdue for another miscarriage. They had given birth to seven kids in their group. On really positive days they would tell themselves the next one wouldn’t happen until the eleventh or twelfth pregnancy. As simple as that sounded, it worked and they felt better about the odds of three more healthy, full-term pregnancies. Ashlyn, in one of her fearful moments during the middle of the first trimester, admitted that she thought Josie should count as their group’s second miscarriage. Ali was horrified at the thought until the keeper explained that the only reason their baby girl had survived was Ali’s miraculous strength. It was a miracle but that didn’t mean it shouldn’t count. They agreed to disagree about that particular fact but the blonde believed it. She believed that they had already had their terrifying, near-death experience with one of their babies and they weren’t going to have another. She took strength from that and just didn’t talk about it with Ali again. But even though she believed that, she was still afraid because she knew miscarriages happened.

“Ok” the keeper answered her wife that night in the studio. “Just like last time.”

“I love you Ashlyn and everything’s going to be just fine. You’ll see” the brunette finally pried herself away and looked her wife in the face with a smile. “We can do this and it’s going to be great.”

“I love you too baby.” They hugged for another few minutes and then Ashlyn sat back and started to pull the afghan off of her beautiful brunette. “Why are you in here anyway?” she asked as she helped Ali to her feet.

“I missed you and I wanted to feel close to you” she answered, her voice sounding pathetic and sweet at the same time.

She hadn’t been trying to make the keeper feel bad, but Ashlyn felt guilt rising up inside her again and she shook her head as they walked down the front stairs to the second floor.

“Can you forgive me honey?” she asked with another apologetic look.

“Ashlyn” Ali stopped in the second-floor hallway and turned to face her anxious wife. “You’re the pregnant lady now” she put her arms around her keeper’s neck and gave her a soft kiss. “You get a pass on a lot of things and I’m pretty much going to do what you want for the next nine months.”

“Ha!” the blonde laughed as quietly as she could.

“Well, a lot more than usual anyway, don’t push it, lady” Ali quirked an eyebrow and kissed her wife again. “You’re going to be the queen around here for a while so remember to use your power wisely.”

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“This is fantastic!” Dr. Comello enthused when she saw Ali and Ashlyn for the keeper’s four-week appointment. Ashlyn was the one in the hospital gown on the exam table and Ali was the one standing next to her and holding her hand. “This is my favorite. I love when both partners have the babies. Yes!”

“Wow doc, tell us how you really feel” Ashlyn joked and they all laughed.

Patty walked them through her standard ‘you’re pregnant now’ spiel and encouraged them both to pay attention even though they’d heard it twice before. Their roles were different this time and they
would be experiencing everything through a new lens. She spent time reviewing all the info from the fertility clinic as well.

“Your hCG levels are very high Ashlyn, that’s great. Does your family have a history of being really fertile?”

“Um, I don’t think so but I don’t really know. I mean my mom had two of us and I don’t think either of us was planned so maybe?” She looked at Ali as if she could offer her some help, which she couldn’t. “Mom told me that both of her pregnancies were pretty easy with no complications or problems. Until we were born anyway” she chuckled. “My brother weighed over eleven pounds when he was born and I was just over nine pounds.”

“Wow. Ok, good to know” Patty made notes on her tablet. “How about morning sickness? Did she have any of that?”

“No she said she didn’t really” the keeper shrugged her shoulders. “But I’m starting to have some, for sure.”

Ashlyn explained how nauseous she had been feeling every morning for the past four or five days. It wasn’t routine or on a schedule like Ali’s had been though. She would be fine one minute and then running to the bathroom or nearest trashcan the next with no warning. They talked about the type of delivery the keeper wanted to have and mapped out a plan together. Dr. Comello instructed her to start doing her kegels as much as possible and to start massaging the perineum too.

“It sounds like you might be carrying a bigger baby, accounting for your mom’s experience, you’re going to want to make sure your pelvic floor is as strong as possible and we’ll try not to do the episiotomy. But I’ve got to tell you” she looked at the blonde seriously. “Sometimes there’s no choice and if the baby’s head is too big then it’s better that we make a controlled incision than just letting him or her rip...”

“Yeah, I got it doc” Ashlyn interrupted, looking a little pale. “I’ve been doing kegels for a long time but I’ll keep doing them” she looked furtively at Ali who just blinked at her without admitting anything about ben wa balls. “And I’ll start the massage and hope for the best with the episiotomy.”

They took the list of prenatal vitamins and other exercises from the doctor and made their 8-week appointment on their way out the door. All Ali could think about as they held hands on the way to the truck was giving birth to an eleven-pound baby. Jesus Christ. Drew had weighed just over seven pounds and that was plenty big enough, thank you very much. Josie had been tiny and early but she had still been just under six pounds. The brunette couldn’t imagine pushing anything bigger than Drew was out of her body. Lord help Ashlyn and her big-headed family genetics. Worst case scenario, Ali thought to herself, she would have a c-section. It wasn’t Ashlyn’s first choice, she wanted to have a natural childbirth just like Ali had done with Drew, but she might not have a choice when it came right down to it. But the brunette made herself stop worrying. There was nothing she could do now except help her wife prepare her body for that day. And that’s exactly what she intended to do.

“You got this Ash” she encouraged her wife and squeezed her hand. “You’re going to crush it.”
September ended with the Breakers finishing out their regular season and making the playoffs. They finished in fourth place and had to travel to LA to face Alex Morgan and the Strikers who had won the Supporter’s Shield again for the second year in a row. Chicago was hosting Seattle in the other playoff game. It had been a strange year for Ashlyn and her relationship with the Breakers. She had waited to announce her retirement until the beginning of July. Her original agreement with the team had been the beginning of May but she didn’t want to mess up Whitney’s Pillar of Excellence ceremony in June so she pushed her announcement back two months. Her revised time on the disabled list and injury report for the league wasn’t up until July 1st anyway so it was actually pretty good timing. The fans were disappointed, to say the least. As much as they had embraced Abby Smith this season, and much of last season, they still loved Ashlyn and were crushed to hear her retirement announcement.

The keeper had held a press conference through the Breakers at the stadium the Wednesday of 4th of July week. She brought Drew with her and he sat on her lap as she read her statement and took some questions. Ali, her agent, stood in the corner of the room ready to help in any way she could. She knew there wasn’t anything she could do to make this easier for her Ashlyn, but they both felt better with her standing there anyway. She listened as her wife spoke the words they had carefully crafted together, although most of them were Ashlyn’s. Ali had helped her pick and choose a few words and tweak a few phrases, but, for the most part, it was a statement from the keeper’s very large heart.

“First of all, thank you for coming this morning, I appreciate you taking the time to report on an old has-been” she smiled as the handful of reporters laughed. That laughter settled the blonde’s nerves and Ali looked on in wonder as her wife’s face came to life. Ashlyn’s beautiful visage was as expressive as a baby’s as it first learned how to work through its emotions. “As some of you may know, I’ve been on the disabled list for the first three months of the season as I rehabbed my leg. My leg isn’t coming along as well as I had hoped and, after a lot of careful thought and reflection, I’ve decided to bring my playing career to a close and retire.”

There was commotion in the room as the reporters started to become more active with the surprising news. Some started live-tweeting the press conference and Ali’s phone, silenced but still in her hand, began to ring immediately. The keeper went on to thank her parents and extended family, her teammates and friends, her coaches, trainers, doctors, therapists and general managers. She made sure to give high praise to both Bob and Jonathan Kraft for buying the team and building such a tremendous stadium for the city of Boston.

“And I want to make sure to thank the Breakers organization before the Krafts took over too” she clarified as her voice caught in her throat for the first time. “My old team didn’t want me anymore. They didn’t think I had anything left in the tank when I was thirty years old. Can you believe that?” she asked with another chuckle that made the room laugh again.

“Mama” Drew laughed along and patted his mother on her cheek adorably.
“I know” she said to her son. “It’s silly” she kissed his head and then turned her attention back to the room. “But it’s true. They didn’t want me and I asked to come here, to Boston, to the Breakers. And it was the best decision I ever made in my life.” She paused for a minute as her emotions rose up again at the thought, not only of her soccer career but also of the love of her life standing there in the corner of the room. “You guys took me in and welcomed me and told me you needed me to help bring this team back to glory. And when I say ‘you guys’ I mean the Breakers staff and team and, just as importantly, the city of Boston. You adopted this Florida girl and turned her into a Bostonian and I’ll never be able to thank you enough for that...for making me one of you and loving me like your own. It’s not a great feeling to be told you don’t matter anymore or that you’re not worth enough to keep around anymore. And that first year here in Boston was a tough one for us, the Breakers. It wasn’t pretty” she chuckled and looked at the coach who was standing in the back of the room. “But we got better. We got a new coach and some new players and we figured out how to be a team and a family and before we knew it we were bringing home the championship cup. But none of that would have been possible if you hadn’t taken a chance on me in the first place. A washed-up, ancient, thirty-year old sweeper keeper who was never quite good enough for the national team. Well, that’s ok. Because we showed them didn’t we?” she looked at her coach again who was smiling broadly and nodding his head. “I’m so proud of what we’ve been able to accomplish here and nothing would have made me happier than to have played a couple more years in Breakers blue and win a couple more championships” she smiled brightly at first but then it turned a little sad. “My leg had other things to say about that, unfortunately. But I’m a Breaker for life and I’ll always be a part of this team. I’ll be around and who knows, maybe one day my daughter will become a Breaker and help win the cup. Wouldn’t that be something?” she laughed and looked around the room as Drew started to get restless on her lap. She found the cinnamon eyes and felt all the love and compassion flowing from them and they gave her strength. “And that brings me to the last people I want to thank. My family. My beautiful wife and our two amazing kids. None of this...” she stopped for a minute to try and steady her voice, looking down at the paper but not really seeing it. “None of this would have been possible without your love and support. You mean everything to me and I hope I’ve made you proud. I love you.”

Her voice was almost a whisper when she finished as she fought back tears. Her face contorted a couple of times when the fight got tough. Drew turned around to see what had upset his mama and the three-year old lay against her chest and hugged her. The whole room audibly sighed at the sweet moment. It was all Ali could do not to sob out loud, her heart was so full. After Ashlyn had taken a couple of minutes to compose herself and have a drink of water she was ready for a few questions. Ali made eye contact with the Breakers media manager who was running things and he nodded back at her. They had agreed on four or five questions and if Ali gave him a signal then he was to end it right away, regardless of how many questions had been answered.

“Ashlyn, can you tell us what prompted your decision to retire now?”

“Were you napping at the beginning Dan or what” she laughed, as did the rest of the room. “My leg’s not responding well. That’s what prompted my decision.”

“So would you say that the freak accident last Fall ended your career?” a different reporter asked.

“I guess you could say that” she replied thoughtfully. “But when I think about that accident I prefer to think about everything I didn’t lose instead.”

“Did your decision have anything to do with losing your starting spot to Abby Smith?” a third reporter asked.

“Steph, really?” she looked at her favorite reporter and shook her head with a small smile on her face. “I expected more from you girl.”
“But that’s what everyone’s going to want to know Ash” she pleaded her case. “Do you want to talk about the role US Soccer plays in the NWSL and the pressure it puts on teams to start national team members?”

“No I don’t” she shook her head again but remained upbeat. “I’m not here today to talk about what I think the league needs to do to improve. I’m here to talk about my retirement but if nobody has any questions…”

There was more commotion in the room as the reporters all started speaking at once, afraid the blonde was going to end the Q&A session.

“Meg” Ashlyn looked at another reporter she liked and trusted more than most.

“What are your plans now? Aside from spending time with your cute son” she grinned at the toddler which made the keeper smile too.

“That’s a great question. I knew I could count on you” Ashlyn nodded at the woman before continuing. “I have a lot of plans and a lot of things in motion. I’ll be continuing with Lifetime TV this season on the player interviews for sure. I’m going to spend time getting the Mental Health Initiative up and running too. That’s a big priority for me and we’ve got quite a team put together that’s working on that. I can’t thank all the athletes and entertainers and organizers who have come forward to help us enough. It’s really going to make a difference in a lot of people’s lives. And one of my dreams has always been to create a soccer academy for girls. That’s in the works too. And then, the other news I have is…” she looked at her wife who smiled back at her and nodded. “Ok, I wasn’t sure if I was allowed to announce it or not” she blushed a little and repositioned Drew onto the other side of her lap. “The Kraft family has asked me to stay on with the Breakers as a community ambassador and I couldn’t be happier about that. They’ve done similar things in the past with the Patriots and the Revs and I’m honored to join the club in that capacity. I’ll keep everybody posted on these things, I promise. I’m really excited about them and I know you will be too.”

The keeper got ready to end the press conference as the media manager started to thank everybody for coming, when Bob Kraft walked into the room behind him and everybody sat back down again.

“I won’t keep you long” Bob began apologetically as he walked over to Ashlyn and gave her a big hug with Drew still on her hip. The media manager moved another chair behind the table so they could both sit down but Bob waved him off with a grin. “I’ll just be a few minutes. There’s no need for that.”

No-one had expected him to make an appearance but when he saw what was on the schedule for the morning he hustled right into the office and made his way to the conference room to sing his favorite player’s praises. He spoke for about ten minutes about meeting Ashlyn and being impressed by the way she interacted with the fans and the staff and the players and the owners.

“She treats everybody the same way” he shrugged his shoulders. “I’ve tried to do the same thing ever since I realized that was part of her secret. But it doesn’t matter who comes up to talk to her or who she encounters in the street or in the stadium or in the grocery store. She treats everybody the way her Grandmother taught her to, with respect and kindness. Do you know the story about the day of that horrible accident?” he asked the room as Ashlyn and Ali shared a surprised look. “Is it ok if I tell this story Ash?” he looked at the keeper expectantly.

“You’re the boss” she grinned and then, after the chuckling in the room stopped, “of course Mr. Kraft.”

“You probably all remember the two young girls and their father who were kind enough and brave
enough to come back to the scene of the accident and try to help little Drew here when he was alone and frightened and confused, right? We had them at the big Kansas City game as our special guests.”

Almost everybody in the room nodded and agreed.

“Well the part about that story that nobody knows is that they had met Ashlyn and Drew on the street a couple of blocks earlier. They were lost and on their way to meet their mother. Ashlyn saw them and noticed that the dad looked a little nervous and maybe concerned and she stopped and offered to help them.” He stood there for a minute as his emotions started to run away on him. “The father didn’t speak English but the little girls did so Ashlyn was able to find out that they needed directions to get...where were they going again Ash?”

“Museum of Science” the keeper supplied.

“T-wex!” Drew said excitedly and made his best roaring sound again.

The room cracked up and Ali’s short, loud shout of a laugh echoed through it as she was surprised by how cute her own damned son was.

“Drew is a big fan of the T-Rex at the Museum of Science” Ashlyn clarified with her own dimpled grin.

“I love it” Bob chuckled and then turned his attention back to the room. “Ashlyn drew them a map so they could get to the museum and meet their mom. Nobody was watching. There were no cameras around to capture that moment and use it for publicity or anything like that. How many other people were there out on that busy street that day that didn’t bother to stop and help? A lot. But Ashlyn did. And those girls remembered her kindness when they heard the crash and knew that she and her son had been walking right towards it. They had to make sure she and Drew were ok. They wanted to return the kindness.” He paused again and let that all sink in. “But that’s part of what makes this woman so special, at least to me anyway. I just think the world of her and I’m so proud of the way she’s always represented both the Breakers and the Kraft family, and the world would be a much better place if everybody could be just a little bit more like Ashlyn Harris.”

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The Mental Health Initiative was moving forward successfully. It had started off with a bang, feeding off of the publicity Ashlyn generated last September with her interview on Lifetime TV. As soon as that aired Ashlyn was contacted by an old high school friend and surfing buddy, Jamie Tworkowski, who was already running his own, successful, non-profit organization called ‘To Write Love on Her Arms’. He wanted to help. Ashlyn and Ali had met with him that Christmas when they were in Florida and he walked them through what they needed to do, step by step and shared a wealth of knowledge he had learned the hard way with his good friend the keeper. Ashlyn had quietly supported TWLOHA for years, wearing their t-shirts and other gear in several of her Road Trip videos and interview segments for Lifetime TV. Jamie had spoken with several members and friends and colleagues in his network of mental health advocates and provided the women with three different names of people that he felt could help them set up and run their organization up in Boston. The friends agreed to sit on the board of each other’s organization and vowed to keep their partnership strong and steady.

When they got back home in January both Ali and Ashlyn felt like they had a real chance to make a difference with their group. Ali had never seen her wife more excited and energized about a project before. In the meantime, since October shortly after Ashlyn’s interview, Ali had some Knight-Harris folks making phone calls to any athlete or celebrity that they could verify had come out publicly in support of mental health awareness. It was a tedious and often painful task but they had managed to
garner support for Ashlyn’s new cause more often than they had initially expected. Ali had told them to start with gay and lesbian celebrities first because they, at least, often knew of Ashlyn. It didn’t hurt when the keeper had gone on the Ellen show in February and talked about it either. It was easy for these athletes and celebrities to check the validity and the source of both Ashlyn and the group she was working to put together in case they doubted the information they received in the phone call. Trying to capitalize on the publicity from the Ellen Show, ‘The Mental Health Initiative’ non-profit organization was officially formed in early March. There were a lot of legal responsibilities and several choices for how to set the non-profit group up. Basically, Ashlyn was in charge of the MHI. She was responsible for selecting the Board of Directors who would ultimately make the decisions for the organization in terms of budgets, funding decisions, etc. There would also be a Manager for the MHI who essentially ran things day to day but reported to the Board.

Ashlyn talked with and then met with the three colleagues Jamie had recommended and the woman they hired to run the daily operations of the MHI was amazing. Helen Siegfriedt was in her late 50’s and she had made a successful career out of managing non-profit organizations over the past twenty-five years. She was from New England but spent roughly half of her time in New York City as well. She specialized in the start-ups and usually stayed with the organization for five years before moving on to the next one. She had three different degrees – an MBA, an MPA which was a Master of Public Administration, and an MSW which was a Master of Social Work. She was expensive but she knew what she was doing and, Jamie, Ashlyn and Ali all agreed, she was worth it if they had any hope of getting the MHI off the ground.

The first thing Helen did was start submitting grant proposals so the organization could get some money and start building its infrastructure. It took a couple of months, but funds did start to appear in the MHI bank. Those funds weren’t even enough to cover Helen’s monthly salary, but it was a start. Ashlyn’s big Nike paycheck was covering any initial start-up costs and paying Helen’s salary for the time being. Ali hadn’t been thrilled about it but she knew she would never try to talk her wife out of fulfilling this dream. She had believed in Ashlyn before and made financial decisions and risked company funds on the blonde before and they had always paid off. She prayed that this time would be no different. That Nike paycheck had been earmarked for a college fund for Drew and Josie.

The next step was to assemble a Board of Directors and Helen had several people she recommended. But she preferred for Ashlyn to find and recruit through her own contacts because the personal link to an organization like this often made the difference in the amount of time and energy the board members were willing to commit. By April the Board of Directors was comprised of Ashlyn Harris, Jamie Tworkowski and Robert Kraft. They were hoping to get seven board members but they were willing to take their time and try to find the right people. There were wealthy philanthropists in the Boston area who would be willing to commit to the MHI once it had its legs underneath it. They didn’t know Ashlyn personally so would need to wait and see if the organization was serious and also set up for success or not. Having Bob Kraft sign on so early was just the type of break they needed and Ashlyn had been blown away when he reached out to her about finding a way to contribute and help.

There was a lot still to be done, for sure, but they had the organization up and fully functional by the end of April. Their main objective, as a non-profit organization, was to increase awareness of mental health issues and solutions in the United States and, secondarily, the world. They planned to do that by getting as many people talking about mental health as possible, starting with the famous people. Once somebody famous had agreed to participate, Ashlyn would interview them on camera about whatever part of the mental health debate was most important to them. And then they would post the interviews on social media and the MHI’s own website. Ali was talking with Lifetime TV about airing an interview series of Ashlyn’s MHI interviews. They were interested, but hesitant because of the subject matter. The brunette wasn’t going to let up though. She was confident she could convince them to bet on Ashlyn just as she had.
Both Ashlyn and Ali were stunned by the response the MHI received once it went live. There was a donation link on the homepage and the organization received over $35,000 the very first day!

“Ashlyn I don’t know what to tell you” Helen’s voice sounded over the speakerphone the next morning in Ali’s K-H office where both she and Ashlyn were standing around her desk. “I didn’t expect this and I’m surprised at the distribution and amounts of the funds donated.”

“I told you Helen” Ashlyn grinned. “I have the best fans in the world and they always try to help a good cause whenever they can.”

“Are you seeing a high number of donors and a lot of low dollar amount donations?” Ali asked as she winked at her still-grinning wife.

“Well, yes” Helen sounded surprised. “For the most part. How did you know that?”

“That’s all the women’s soccer fans” the brunette explained. “If you look into the donors I’ll bet a lot of them are high school girls donating the only $5 or $10 they have this week.”

“We’re going to need a lot more than $35,000” Helen brought the discussion back on track. “But this is a wonderful start ladies. I’m really impressed by your women’s soccer community. Hats off to them if they can sustain some sort of steady donation presence for us.”

“Don’t ever bet against them Helen” Ashlyn did a silent double fist pump in celebration as Helen ended the call.

The MHI was looking for two kinds of people to join their ranks. Supporters and Strugglers. Supporters were anybody who didn’t suffer from mental health issues directly but wanted to help. Strugglers were anybody who struggled with some sort of mental health challenge, no matter how big or how small, and was willing to share their story with the world. The MHI asked the famous supporters to film a short video making a statement that they would post on the website and across social media. And that was another area they needed to improve. They needed an in-house camera crew with good equipment to be able to film Ashlyn’s interviews as well as any other videos for the organization. They also needed an official office space instead of the post office box that was their official address that first year. But not everything could happen all at once. They had to make smart moves and take intelligent baby steps to keep growing the organization. Since Ashlyn’s interview at Becky Sauerbrunn’s retirement game back in September of last year, Tammye Harris had been handling correspondence for the MHI. Any mail that wasn’t official got bundled up and shipped down to the beach house in Florida where Tammye went through it. There were letters to Ashlyn, primarily, and some of them were silly or disgusting fan letters. Some were sweet fan letters. But most were letters written from a dark place by someone who had lived most of their life in pain or at least confusion. A lot of those letters were cries for help but even more of them were expressions of gratitude. Tammye grouped them and sorted them and told her daughter about as many as they both had time for. Ashlyn wrote back to some and signed a ton of postcards with her picture on the other side with a short message of hope and acceptance. Those signed postcards got shipped down to Tammye during that first year as the organization ramped up and she would put them in a discreet envelope and mail them back in reply to the letters that had moved her the most.

By the end of the summer the roster of celebrities and athletes who had joined their cause was impressive as hell. Ashlyn had established some very good connections over the past eight years and she called on every single one of them to help her with her new mission. Ali did the same thing, as did everybody else that the keeper knew. Whitney was trying to get some of her rich classmates at Harvard Law to donate money if they couldn’t do anything else. Even Dev made a very generous donation to the MHI. Ashlyn knew she had Hannah to thank for that and made sure to tell her how grateful she was. Building the roster had been like that old Faberge Organics shampoo commercial
with Heather Locklear from the 80’s. Heather liked the shampoo so much that she told two friends, ‘and they told two friends, and they told two friends, and so on and so on and so on’. Everybody had somebody else they wanted to bring into the group and it was fantastic. The women’s soccer world stepped up big time, as Ashlyn and Ali both knew they would. At least half of the 500 soccer players under contract in the NWSL signed up as a Supporter and offered to make any video Ashlyn wanted. The USWNT did a huge shout out after almost every game and Tobin Heath, Christen Press, Abby Smith, Rose Lavelle and Ashlyn’s other friends all promoted the organization as much as they could on social media and by simply wearing MHI gear. Michelle Akers and Abby Wambach were probably the most famous of the retired USWNT players to come forward as Strugglers. They both stepped up early on too. Abby Wambach was able to reach out to some former Olympic athletes she was still good friends with and several of them joined the ranks of both the Supporters and the Strugglers. The biggest superstar from this avenue of athletes was Michael Phelps, the US record holder for most Olympic gold medals won. That was a fucking coup to get Michael Phelps on board as a Struggler!

Ashlyn worked with Julian Edelman and Tom Brady to get to some NFL players and several of them joined as Strugglers and even some Supporters. Tom and Julian did a video together for social media identifying themselves as Supporters and urging other athletes to join them and help the MHI change the world. It was amazing. The most famous NFL players to join the Strugglers group were both Superbowl MVP winning quarterbacks, Steve Young and Terry Bradshaw. The WNBA and NWHL both promoted Ashlyn’s work and organization as much as they could at all of their games. Ali had worked directly with the teams to garner support and make sure they had what they needed to correctly promote the MHI and help make a difference.

It had been interesting how the support had come through. It started with the NWSL and the NWHL and WNBA and other women’s athletic groups and individuals. There were some very famous LPGA and Women’s Tennis stars who joined on as Supporters and Strugglers. But it was all female at first. After that came the LGBT+ support, which was a natural progression following women athletes. And that’s where the support hung for a few months. Ladies who played sports and ladies who loved ladies. Then Abby Wambach’s ability and willingness to help branch out to the Olympians was the first big step up. The Michael Phelps video changed everything and everybody at the MHI knew it. That started to bring in the rest of the male athletes like the NFLers who were so afraid of being associated with lesbian athletes. It snowballed. And, finally, the rest of the LGBT+ community stepped up huge at the end of June when the MHI put out a lot of pro-Pride content. So now even more male athletes were helping out either because they were gay or because the MHI had Michael Phelps and Tom Brady and Terry Bradshaw signed up.

The celebrity group was a much slower start and took a lot more effort. They didn’t know who Ashlyn was so it was practically a cold call asking for a donation and a revealing personal story for the world to see online. No wonder the celebs weren’t crashing the MHI website signing up. There had been a handful of actors and actresses who had already been vocal fighters for mental health rights and they signed up. Kristen Bell, Glenn Close, Lena Dunham, Patton Oswalt, and Billie Lorde, who was the late Carrie Fisher’s daughter, were the first to join the MHI, all as Strugglers. But then the celebrity train kind of stalled. Ashlyn went back to Tom Brady and asked if Gisele Bundchen could help maybe just with a promotional or educational spot. She agreed and wanted to focus on mental health issues for children, specific to sports performance. Her video jumped into the top three of the most popular within hours of its release. Gisele urged her circle of friends to get involved and that’s how the MHI began working with Cara Delvigne and Chrissy Teigen, both of whom joined as Strugglers. That launched a whole new round of other celebrities signing on and donating to the cause.

And after all of that happened in the summer of 2022, the biggest and most incredible addition to the roster came in September. It had taken almost six months of phone calls and patience but Kyle
Krieger’s persistence finally paid off.

“Ky, calm down, I can’t even understand you” Ali squinted as if that would help her hear her brother through the phone better. It was almost 10pm and she was just getting into bed. She gave an apologetic half-smile to her wife who watched her sleepily from her side of the bed. “Where are you?”

“Sis! I’m too excited! I can’t calm down. I can’t even sit down. I’m gonna dance all night long...”

“Kyle...are you alright” the old fear spiked in her heart for a second when she heard how deliriously happy and out of it he sounded over the phone.

“I’m better than fucking alright Alex. I have the best news. You’re just gonna die when you hear this!!” he yelled into the phone so loudly that Ashlyn was able to make out most of his words. “Is your hot wife there with you too?”

Ali put him on speaker phone and turned the volume down, afraid her excitable brother might wake up Josie next door in the nursery.

“Yeah I’m here bro, you’re on speaker, what’s going on?” Ashlyn sat up and yawned.

“Seriously, you both better sit your asses down for this. I can’t be responsible for any injuries because you pass out or faint or whatever...” he paused. “Are you sitting?”

“Kyle!”

“Yeah!”

They both yelled, exasperated with his antics.

“Ok, ok, geez, talk about ungrateful...”

“Kyle Johnson Krieger...” Ali started but as soon as he heard his middle name and the tone of his sister’s voice he knew he had pushed too far.

“You know my friend Mark? Mark Kanemura? The dancer?”

“Yeah, he was on ‘So You Think You Can Dance’ and then became one of Lady Gaga’s back-up dancers, right?” Ashlyn replied, still sounding sleepy. “You’ve done videos with him before” she started to recall and chuckled. “He’s the dude with the pinky finger that bends some weird way and you were so funny” she giggled, “you teased him about where he could put it...”

“You two are absolutely killing me right now” Ali sighed heavily when Kyle started laughing with the blonde about the funny video she was remembering.

“Damn girl, you have a good memory. He’s Gaga’s lead dancer now though. Your brain is fine, I don’t care what anybody says” he quipped.

“Yeah, yeah, ok” Ashlyn tried to move things along now because she could see her wife was tired and just wanted to go to sleep. “So what about Mark?”

“Well, I’ve been talking to him about the MHI for months now, since the very beginning really, and he always thought it was a great idea. Well, I sent him some shirts and swag and he and some of the other dancers have been wearing it to rehearsals and stuff. A bunch of them got together a couple months ago to film a video of support to post on your website and you’ll never guess who caught the end of it and asked about it and wanted to learn more about it.”
Ali couldn’t even stay frustrated at her brother because she could hear the excitement and pride and happiness in his voice. All she could do was grin and listen.

“The british guy from ‘SYTYCD’...Nigel” Ashlyn guessed with her own grin. “And he wants to do a special show just about mental health issues. Am I right?” she teased and chuckled.

“Nope” Kyle said succinctly, popping the p. “Better.”

Ashlyn and Ali looked at each other with surprise. What would be better than network television exposure?

“Better than Nigel?” Ali asked and shrugged her shoulders. “I can’t think of anything better than that.”

“Well your organization isn’t going to get very far if you keep aiming so low” Kyle chastised them playfully and giggled. “No more guesses?”

“Please tell us Kyle” Ashlyn begged. “The suspense is driving me crazy!”

“Gaga. Herself” he whispered and then squealed like a teenage girl.

“Ha ha, very funny bro” Ashlyn fake laughed at her brother-in-law.

“Kyle, please, I’m begging you. I need to go to sleep...”

“No, guys, I’m totally serious. I would not joke about this. Mark gave Lady Gaga your MHI info and she’s been looking into it and she told him today that she wanted to talk to you. Mark just called me.”

Ali and Ashlyn looked at each other in utter disbelief. Ali’s eyes were wide and Ashlyn’s jaw was on the floor as they listened to Kyle talk about one of the most famous entertainers in the entire world.

“Who...who...who does she want to talk to?” Ali asked, her throat suddenly very dry.

“Ash” Kyle answered. “Although Mark says she called her the hottie with the tattoos” he giggled.

“Jesus Christ.”

“Oh my Fucking God.”

“You’re welcome” Kyle practically sang into the phone. “So I gave Mark your iPhone number All-star. And he’s giving it to Gaga so be ready when your phone rings” he laughed. “Don’t be answering it like it’s your wife calling to nag you about something” he giggled again, pleased with himself for every bit of this phone conversation. “Helloooo? Is anybody still there? Seriously, I told you to sit down. You’d better not both be passed out and on the ground...”

It took until the next afternoon for Lady Gaga to call Ashlyn and the keeper had never been more nervous in her whole life. Her hand shook when she answered the call and she was shocked that she was able to speak at all during the fifteen-minute phone conversation. But it went well and they made plans for Ashlyn to go to NYC and meet with the superstar to answer some more questions she had about the organization she was considering joining. Kyle and Mark joined Ashlyn and Lady Gaga for their meeting and it was held in a conference room of her recording company in NYC. They talked about the MHI for almost two hours one late September afternoon and then Gaga suggested they get dinner. The private, back room of the superstar’s favorite restaurant in the city was where they ate dinner, laughed a lot and got to know each other better. Gaga announced that there was no
business talk during dinner and everyone gladly obeyed. One of Gaga’s best friends owned the restaurant and kept the back room for her whenever she wanted or needed it.

It turned out that the two women had more than a few things in common. They were only one year apart age-wise so they had all the same cultural references. They were both LGBT+ and had been misfits in high school who didn’t blossom until college. They were both very artistic, although Ashlyn was nowhere near Gaga’s level. And they both struggled with PTSD, even though Ashlyn’s was mild and had been under control for quite a while now. Lady Gaga was very touched by some of the keeper’s stories about taking Fred to the Veterans Hospitals and Medical Centers in Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Rhode Island since her accident, just over a year ago. Before long they had all begun to compare tattoos, which took a very long time and got pretty personal. Ashlyn couldn’t help herself when she saw the german words tattooed on Gaga’s arm, genuinely struck by the coincidence, and blurted out that her wife had a german quote tattooed on her body as well. The keeper had to explain the quote and Lady Gaga was incredibly moved by Ashlyn, her tattoos, her story, her struggles of the last year, and somehow the shared german words had been an undeniable sign that they were supposed to work together on this project. Before the evening was through, Lady Gaga had agreed not only to be a Struggler and record an interview with the keeper, but also a board member for the MHI. Ashlyn was speechless. The Mental Health Initiative was real and the keeper couldn’t believe how proud she was of it. It would require a lot of care and attention for the next couple of years as it solidified itself as a real impact-player in the mental health world, but with the kind of support they had already received Ashlyn knew they were well on their way to reaching that goal. Aside from her wedding and the birth of her children, and maybe getting Whitney the Supporter’s Shield and Championship Cup for her retirement year, there was nothing that made her happier or prouder than her work with the MHI. She felt like they were doing good work, and work that really mattered. It was just the type of thing she wanted for her legacy. It was exactly what she wanted to be known for.
The first trimester of Ashlyn’s pregnancy had gone pretty smoothly, except for her morning sickness which had started early, at two weeks. She had most of the other early pregnancy symptoms too, but they were fairly manageable. She had mood swings that were much worse than Ali’s, or else Ali had been a saint among saints – which they both knew was not the case. Her breasts were sensitive and swollen, she got a bad headache almost every evening, she had to pee all the time, she had some light spotting, she was bloated and she was really tired. The keeper had always wondered about her wife’s odd cravings and food repulsion while she was carrying both of their children. She never accused Ali of making things up or milking things, but she just always wondered how big a deal it was to get that chicken pot pie her brunette said she was going to die without. Well, the cravings were real and serious and Ashlyn really did feel like her world might come to an end sometimes, especially with the hormones, unless she ate a banana in the next ten minutes. The blonde craved milk chocolate which was sort of new because she wasn’t a huge chocoholic, she was more of a sweets girl who went for Skittles and gummy worms and things like that. She also craved whole dill pickles which was about as cliché as you can get when it comes to the pregnant woman trope. Ashlyn also craved bananas and, finally, honey mustard pretzel bits. Those were her four ‘must keep fully stocked at all times’ food cravings and Ali did her very best to plan ahead. The brunette resorted to keeping a secret, emergency stash in the basement, much as Ashlyn had done with her chicken pot pies in the deep freezer down there. None of her cravings were as specific as the chicken pot pie from the specific place like Ali’s were. But Ashlyn did have preferred brands for her dill pickles and her pretzel bits and Ali often found herself going to three different grocery stores or convenience stores to get just the right ones. She began to stop at grocery stores near Sydney’s house in Lynnfield on her way home from work. That way she had at least four or five others she could stop at before she actually got to the big old house.

The bigger problem was with the foods that the keeper could no longer stand to smell or eat. Three foods that Ashlyn had always loved were now the most unpalatable things she could dream of: tomatoes - raw or cooked, cantaloupe, and Nutella. If Ali came home with salads for lunch or dinner and they accidentally put tomatoes on the blonde’s, then she wouldn’t even touch it. Even if the actual tomatoes were removed from the salad she could still taste them afterwards and couldn’t eat the salad. It was frustrating, but Ali remembered it well. They gave the kids cantaloupe and Nutella so those items weren’t going away, but Ashlyn didn’t mind if they were around and being eaten by others, she just couldn’t stand the taste of them anymore. But the foods she couldn’t stand the smell of were very problematic. Popcorn and peanut butter were both automatic vomit inducers for Ashlyn. The popcorn wasn’t that big of a deal because nobody else in the house ate that much of it so it was easy enough just to make popcorn disappear from the big old house for nine months. But the peanut butter was a disaster. It was practically Drew’s favorite food and he ate it every day at breakfast and sometimes lunch and often as a snack. After several days of chaos at breakfast because Drew was upset that his mama wouldn’t eat with him and Ashlyn kept running to the bathroom to throw up, the keeper just resorted to putting a spring-loaded chip-clip (the kind you sealed the bag of chips with) on her nose and muscling through it. The first morning the blonde tried it, Ali almost dropped all of
the breakfast food she was carrying from the counter to the table as soon as she caught sight of her wife.

The morning sickness was the worst though. Ali’s had been bad but she had been prepared for it. Deb had warned her and that had been so helpful. But Tammye said she never really had much morning sickness so the keeper was stumped when it started happening to her. Instead of the three bouts of puking, spread out at predictable intervals, like Ali had, Ashlyn would throw up almost as soon as she sat up in bed. She started sleeping with a bucket right next to her bed just in case she couldn’t make it to the bathroom right away. Then she continued puking pretty continuously for an entire hour. Then, if she ate anything during the next two hours or so, she would throw it all up again ten minutes later. Ali felt horrible for her poor wife but she knew there wasn’t much she could do to help her. She didn’t even need her to hold her hair back anymore. If she could, if the kids weren’t awake yet and the dogs weren’t whining to go out yet, the brunette would sit beside her on the same stool that Ashlyn had used to keep her company during both of her pregnancies. Ali would rub her back and give her sips of water in between bouts and tell her what a wonderful job she was doing and how much she loved her.

It had been quite the eye-opening experience for the keeper. Being pregnant was hard and scary and uncomfortable, but it was also so freaking cool. Every time Ashlyn got aggravated or frustrated by a symptom during the early stages of her pregnancy she took a deep breath, or several, and pictured the little fetus that was growing inside her body. She visualized her baby, her little boy or little girl, and made herself remember why her body was doing the things it was doing. Before too long, she was able to be at peace with her sore breasts and her impossibly tiny bladder and her short temper. She had always been a glass-half-full kind of a girl and this was no exception. Ashlyn was happily surprised to find that some of the work she had done with Mattie to help with her PTSD had made this mental manipulation a little bit easier.

When they went to Ashlyn’s 8-week appointment towards the end of October, Dr. Comello noted down all of the keeper’s symptoms and expressed some concern about the severity of the morning sickness. Ashlyn hadn’t gained any weight yet either, which wasn’t a huge concern because the first two weeks wasn’t when the weight gain typically happened, but she wanted to see the blonde gain about four pounds before she came back for her 12-week appointment.

“I’d love to doc” Ashlyn frowned. “But I can’t keep anything down for most of the morning. I don’t really eat anything until almost 11am when I’m sure it will stay down.”

“I understand” Patty smiled warmly at the first-time pregnant patient. “Like I said, I’m not that worried about it because I know you’re fit and healthy and that you’ll be eating a good and healthy diet once you get past your morning sickness. So don’t stress about it. Just do the best you can and I know we’ll be able to get you caught up in your second trimester.”

Several minutes later the doctor pursed her lips and squinted at the sonogram monitor. Ali and Ashlyn glanced nervously at each other. They weren’t expecting to hear or see anything at that appointment – it was too early in the pregnancy. But that was Patty’s worried face, or at least it was her thinking-hard face and they both hated it.

“What’s the matter Patty?” Ali asked, bravely, as her wife squeezed her hand even harder.

“Nothing’s the matter” the doctor replied carefully, not taking her eyes off of the monitor, “except maybe that my eyes are going” she chuckled and turned her attention to the two women. “Oh, no, nothing’s wrong” she repeated quickly and patted Ashlyn’s leg reassuringly once she registered the looks of terror on their faces. “Your numbers and levels are all excellent, better than expected actually. I’m just not getting a good view or the sonogram is acting up or something. I’m just not
seeing what I expected to see. That’s all. And that happens sometimes, a lot. Remember how hard it
was to get a good picture of Josie?”

“Yeah, that’s right” Ashlyn breathed out and closed her eyes. “I remember that.”

“I think this is the same thing. I’m sure the baby’s just in a funny position and not giving me a good
look.”

Ali still looked frightened and Patty looked her right in the eye as she spoke to her.

“All, it’s ok. If I was worried about something I would tell you. I promise.” She waited for the
brunette to acknowledge her words somehow and when it didn’t happen she spoke again. “But how
about this. Let’s not wait for twelve weeks. Why don’t you come back at ten weeks and we’ll take
another look. Sound good?”

“Yes” Ali finally blinked and let out the breath she didn’t even know she had been holding. “Thanks
Patty.”

After the appointment was over Patty made some excuse to keep Ali behind for a minute so she
could talk to her while Ashlyn went out to make the next appointment.

“Listen” Dr. Comello gave the brunette a stern look and quirked an eyebrow at her as they stood
close together. “You cannot do that to her. You have to be the strong, resilient one for her now.
There’s nothing wrong but I don’t want her worrying about anything else. Do you understand me?”

Ali felt terrible, weak and useless and awful.

“God, I’m sorry” she shook her head and lowered her eyes.

“You’re both really strong and you’re both going to do great during this pregnancy. I don’t doubt
that. But this one’s different. She’s never done this before and she’s going to be nervous and anxious
and questioning everything, just like you were during your first pregnancy...”

“No, I know” Ali snapped herself out of it. “I get it. It won’t happen again. I’ll do better.” She smiled
at the doctor. “Thanks Patty. I needed that kick in the ass.”

As they drove home that morning they were both quiet. Ashlyn kept her hand on her wife’s leg as
the brunette drove. It wasn’t until Ali pulled into the driveway that the keeper spoke.

“Did she give you the hard talk about staying strong for me and not letting me get worked up and
worried about this ultrasound thing?”

“What?” Ali turned to her, surprised.

“You don’t think you’re the first person in this truck she ever had that talk with, do you?” Ashlyn
smiled softly at her wife. Ali’s mouth dropped open. “It’s ok honey. You’re doing great. It’s harder
than it looks being the expectant partner. Don’t get me wrong, it’s a hell of a lot easier than being the
pregnant one” she chuckled and so did the brunette.

“I’m sorry I kind of froze up in there Ash. I’ll do better, I promise” she leaned over the console and
waited for her keeper to meet her lips in a kiss. As they pulled apart, both smiling, Ali spoke again.
“You’re the one who’s doing great babe.”

The next two weeks were just about as bad as the ‘two-week wait’ to find out if they were pregnant.
This wasn’t quite as bad because Patty had told them nothing was wrong and they trusted her. But
still...it was hard to get through those two weeks. Luckily they had Halloween to distract them. And Josie was teething again which always was stressful and difficult for everybody in the family. But Drew, dressed up as a T-Rex, and Josie as the cutest little lady bug you ever saw certainly helped their parents cope. Their 8-week appointment had been during NWSL Championship Week. Boston lost their playoff game against LA and then lost the consolation game against Seattle. For the first time anybody could remember, the final standings after the Championship game were the same as the final table results. LA won, Chicago came in second, Seattle third and Boston fourth. The LA Strikers were also the only other team, since Boston had achieved it two seasons ago, to win both the Supporters Shield and the Championship. Thankfully, they hadn’t done it on their home pitch because Houston hosted Championship Week this year. That honor remained exclusively the Breakers’.

Finally it was November 9th and Ashlyn and Ali were back in Dr. Comello’s office for their unusual, but considerate, 10-week appointment.

“Ok, I understand now” Patty nodded and grinned at the monitor as Ashlyn and Ali gripped each other’s hand for dear life.

“That’s great doc” Ashlyn’s voice had the slightest quiver in it. “How about sharing it with us?”

“Alright you two” she turned and looked at them both with a big smile on her face. “There’s absolutely nothing wrong. At all. But I know why your morning sickness is so bad and why all your levels are higher than usual.” She paused for two more seconds until she thought both women were going to yell out loud to hurry up. “You’re having twins!”

Nobody said anything for a full minute. Nobody moved. Nobody even breathed, except Patty who quietly went back to the monitor to try and find a half-decent picture for the stunned couple to take home with them. When it was clear that neither Ali nor Ashlyn was going to say anything, Dr. Comello went on to explain a few things.

“When you carry twins a lot of the rules change, for obvious reasons. But the basics are still the same. The reason you’re having such severe morning sickness and other early pregnancy symptoms Ashlyn is because you have twice as many hormones working inside you to get your body ready to grow these babies.” She looked up at the women and was relieved to see that they were both paying attention, even though they still hadn’t moved or made a sound. “I’ll need to see you every three weeks instead of four. You’ll find out pretty quickly that everything we do when we have a twin pregnancy is a little bit extra. Extra visits, extra tests, extra TLC...”

The doctor went on to explain that Ashlyn would need to make really sure to eat right. With two babies in her uterus she would have even less room in her stomach so she needed to be extra smart about what she ate. Dr. Comello gave them a little booklet that was filled with tips and tricks about getting enough nutrition from the least amount of food. It had been put together from feedback from other women Patty’s practice had helped successfully deliver twins or triplets. Patty told Ashlyn she wouldn’t be able to exercise as much as Ali had with her singleton pregnancies, but any exercise was better than none. She encouraged the blonde to swim more than anything. The doctor walked them through how much weight she wanted Ashlyn to gain each month and they revised all of her prenatal vitamins to accommodate for the extra baby. Dr. Comello then talked about the scariest part of all, the milestones during the pregnancy that they would achieve as the babies grew. Terrifying words like ‘threshold of viability’ and ‘survival rate’ and ‘fetal complications’ and ‘long-term NICU residency’ filled the small room and stole Ashlyn’s breath away.

“I know this sounds frightening” Patty’s voice was soft and comforting. “And sometimes things go wrong during pregnancy. You both know that and I’m not going to lie to you. There’s an increased
risk of everything with a multiple pregnancy. But” she hit the ‘but’ hard and raised both her
eyebrows as she squeezed the blonde’s knee, “we are so much better nowadays at taking care of you
and both of your babies while you’re doing all this hard work. If you take good care of yourself you
won’t have anything to worry about Ashlyn. You guys are such a good team and I know you’re
going to do just great, all four of you.”

‘Four of you’. She fucking said ‘four of you’, Ali thought in a panic. Me, Ashlyn and our twins.
Good Lord we’re having twins. How the hell are we going to be able to handle two more babies? At
the same time?

“Alright then” Patty finally said. “I’ll see you back in three weeks and we’ll hear two lovely
heartbeats and maybe we can tell if they’re fraternal or identical then too” she beamed.

Both women had to come out of their shocked daze to thank Dr. Comello as she left the exam room
and moved on to her next patient. Ashlyn still held Ali’s hand and she could feel how sweaty it was.
The brunette was nervous and so was she. Twins. Holy shit. There were so many emotions flooding
her system in that moment, and then when you factored in the abundant hormones too it wasn’t
surprising when the keeper started to laugh. It was soft at first, as she lay there on the table in her
hospital gown, but it grew deeper and louder every second until her whole body was shaking and her
eyes were shedding tears of laughter.

“We’re having twins!” she cackled and turned her head to look at her beautiful brunette who was
staring at her in mild confusion.

It only took a second for Ali to understand that her wife wasn’t losing her mind, she was just
laughing at the absurdity of the situation. She started laughing too and they both cracked up for a
good five minutes before simmering down and wiping their happy tears away. Ali leaned down and
gave her keeper a slow, sweet kiss as she caressed her cheek with her free hand. She felt calm and
happy. It was as if the laughter had reset everything after the shock they received with the news.

“Yes we are babe. Two beautiful babies for the price of one. How lucky are we?” the brunette
asked, her voice full of emotion.

“We are so fucking lucky honey. I love you and I love our babies. I just can’t believe it” Ashlyn
grinned up at her wife and they shared another kiss. “Good thing we already have a big house!”

In the three weeks between that momentous appointment and their next, 13-week, appointment, both
Ali and Ashlyn took time to just sit still and process the new information. Life in the big old house
didn’t slow down for them, but each night, after Drew and Josie were asleep, the couple sat together
on the couch or in the bathtub or in bed and talked about what having twins meant to them. They
talked about their fears and concerns. They talked about their growing excitement. They talked about
how lucky they were to have two healthy babies growing inside the keeper instead of just one. After
the initial shock had worn off it had been impossible for either woman to be anything other than
grateful and excited about the news.

When they heard first one, and then a second heartbeat echoing through the exam room at their 13-
week appointment, they both had tears in their eyes.

“I’ll adjust this a bit so you can really hear the difference between the two heartbeats” Patty offered,
her face one big grin.

“I still can’t believe it” Ashlyn shook her head as she held her wife’s hand. “That’s the best sound
Dr. Comello ran through her list of questions, getting updated information from the patient, and then did the ultrasound. It was amazing to see how much bigger they looked in just three weeks. Ashlyn had only gained three pounds in the first trimester but that wasn’t too far off what the doctor had targeted for her. And, when you remembered that she had spent the better part of every morning throwing up for the past three months, it was remarkable that she had gained any weight at all.

“Ok ladies, are you ready to find out a little bit more about your babies?” Dr. Comello asked as she pointed at the monitor. “These two blobs here are the two, different placentas inside your uterus. One for each baby.”

“That means they’re fraternal twins, right?” Ali leaned closer to try and get a better look.

“That’s right” Patty chuckled. “You’ve done your homework I see.”

“Neither of us ever even considered the possibility of twins, we don’t have any family history of them either, so we had some research to do” the keeper grinned. “And we didn’t use any fertility drugs so twins was just the last thing we expected” Ali added. “Fraternal twins. But we still don’t know the sex yet. It could be any combination, right?”

“Yes. There’s a theory that your body can sense its own biological clock. So the older you are the higher the chance that you will produce multiple eggs instead of just one when you ovulate. It’s like your body’s own insurance plan to help re-populate the species” she chuckled.

“Well I just turned 37 and I know that’s on the older end of the spectrum for getting pregnant” Ashlyn shrugged. “I guess that makes sense.”

“Can you tell us about fraternal twins? We read about it but you always make everything so much easier to understand” Ali asked with a shy smile.

“Fraternal twins mean that you produced two eggs and they were both fertilized by two different sperm, just at the same time. So these two little ones could be as different as Drew and Josie are. But they’ll be born at the same time.”

“And they’ll always have a special bond because they spent their time in the womb together...” Ali started to ask.

“It’s really interesting” Patty interrupted, her own excitement taking over. “There are all kinds of ultrasound pictures that show one twin reaching out for the other in the womb or both of them stroking each other. This sort of activity doesn’t usually happen before 18 weeks, but it happens and I think it’s incredible. We just have no idea what goes on in there between the two of them.”

They shared some more stories about research they had done and previous twins Patty had delivered and the doctor was very happy to see that both mothers had adapted nicely to their new reality.

“You should start to see some relief from the morning sickness soon, if you haven’t already.”

“Yes, I waited and waited yesterday and never threw up” the keeper chuckled. “But today, as soon as I woke up I was back at it. I’ll be glad when that’s finished.”

“Ok I’ll see you in three weeks then. Hopefully we can tell the sex of the babies with that ultrasound. But maybe not so don’t get your hearts set on it. If not next time then the 19-week appointment for sure.”
The week before that 13-week appointment had been Thanksgiving and the young Krieger family went to Satellite Beach and Melbourne Beach to spend the week with the Harris clan. Debbie and Mike Christopher drove up to Carol’s beach house on Wednesday and stayed through the weekend. There was just enough room in the three-bedroom basement level with Ali, Ashlyn and their kids. Carol and Tammye couldn’t have been happier to have them all as their guests. They were hosting this year and it would be the first time the Harrises did Thanksgiving anywhere except Gram’s old house. Tammye had spoken to both of her children weeks ago to see how they felt about the idea. Chris had told her he and Beth were happy to host if they wanted but wouldn’t mind taking a year off from the responsibility either, especially with the extra family attending. Ashlyn told her mother that she would be fine with whatever they decided, she was just happy to be with them that year.

That left only Mike Harris to check in with. In his typical fashion, Mike didn’t say much about it one way or the other. He never endorsed the idea when his ex-wife proposed it, nor did he say he thought it was a bad idea. He basically just shrugged his shoulders and left Tammye wondering how he really felt about it. And since she, and most of the rest of the family, was tired of that frustrating act of indifference that had become all too common over the past few years, they decided to have the big holiday gathering at Carol’s beach house. To his credit, Mike Harris never complained to anybody about it. He did, however, ask Chris and Beth if they thought it would be alright if he brought a friend with him that year. Chris gave his mom and sister the heads up and then paid for it by being peppered with a million questions.

“Well who’s he bringing?” Tammye asked on Monday afternoon that week while she sat with both of her children in the screen porch of Chris’ house.

“I told you, I don’t know” he shook his head and looked down at the shopping list they had just finalized together. “Beth thinks it might be Lydia. I guess I do too.”

“Well who else could it be?” Tammye made a skeptical face. “He’s not going to bring one of his buddies just for the hell of it.”

“Who’s Lydia?” Ashlyn asked with a frown as she looked over her brother’s shoulder to make sure he had added bananas, dill pickles, and honey mustard pretzel bits to the shopping list.

Chris and Tammye exchanged a surprised look that the blonde didn’t notice. She sat back in her seat, satisfied with the shopping list and watched her brother and mother take turns looking at each other.

“Guys, I’m sitting right here watching your little show. Who’s Lydia and what’s the big deal?” she asked, exasperated and a little cranky. Josie hadn’t slept well their first night in Florida and the keeper needed a nap.

“She’s a friend of Dad’s...” Chris began cautiously.

“Duh, that’s the one and only thing I know about her dipshit.”

“That’s enough young lady” Tammye chastised quietly but seriously. She looked at her daughter’s tired face for another minute before speaking again. “She and your father spend time together, sometimes. But none of us really know that much about her. We’ve all learned bits and pieces from your father, over time.”

“She’s a bartender at the Surf Side” Chris added. “I’m pretty sure that’s where they met and mostly where they hang out when they get together.”

Ashlyn swallowed hard as she took the information in. She didn’t care that her father had a
girlfriend. She never expected him to live like a monk after he divorced her mother. She knew he had
dated other women over the years and she always thought it was sad that he never felt like he could
bring one of them home to meet his family. What made the bile rise up in her throat about this Lydia
person was the fact that her father was spending time at a bar. That made her afraid and angry.

“So he met her at a bar and hangs out with her at a bar and this doesn’t bother either one of you?”
she asked with more than a little bite.

“This is why he’s never told you about her” Chris shook his head and looked down in frustration.

“Why?” Ashlyn challenged him right back. “Because he knows I’ll tell him he’s being reckless and
careless with the most important thing in his life...his fucking sobriety?” she looked from her brother
to her mother and then back again. “You’re damned right that’s why he never told me.”

“Hey” Chris snapped his head up and levelled her with a serious look. “Don’t come down here and
judge the way we do things when you’re not around. None of us are perfect, in case you forgot, and
we’re all doing the best we can.”

“Christopher” Tammye spoke up before Ashlyn could reply, hoping to end this fight before it really
got going. “She never said that. Don’t go putting words in her mouth...”

“Well she may as well have” he interrupted with anger flashing in his eyes. “That’s what she’s
thinking. Isn’t it?” he met his sister’s gaze and they stared at each other for a minute, neither one
blinking.

The truth was that Ashlyn would never judge Chris for that. She felt guilty that he was the one still
down here taking care of things and keeping an eye on their father. She appreciated what he did
more than she was able to tell him, obviously. And Chris, for his part, felt bad that he didn’t have
more time to spend with his father and had twisted that around in his head and blamed his sister for
his own guilt.

“The fact is they’ve been seeing each other for a few years now” Tammye explained, hoping to
distract her daughter with some more information. “Beth told me that Lydia helps take care of her
young granddaughter during the day so her daughter can go to work. That doesn’t leave much time
for your father to see her, except when she goes to work at the Surf Side.”

They were all quiet for a few minutes and Chris was praying for Lizzy to wake up from her nap so
he could get out of that conversation.

“He’s lonely Bash” he said softly. “He helps Beth at the shop and he helps us with the kids and then
after dinner, or sometimes even earlier, although we try to have him eat with us every night, he’s
alone with nothing much to do.” The big man watched his sister’s face contort as she fought the tears
that were starting to form in her eyes. “So he goes and sits at the bar and watches whatever’s on the
tv and talks to Lydia about her day when she’s between orders. They talk about their grandkids a lot.
He drinks ginger ale all night and then goes back to his apartment to go to sleep.”

“He’s not unhappy honey” Tammye saw how sad the blonde was and leaned forward and took her
daughter’s hand. “He’s just a quiet guy who doesn’t like to do very much. He’s always been that
way. Your brother just described most of our marriage” she chuckled and so did Chris. “Just swap
out the ginger ale for vodka and we spent a lot of years like that.”

“Yeah, but is he happy?” Ashlyn squeaked out, her throat closing up as she tried hard not to cry.

“I think he is” Chris answered with a nod of his head. “And that’s why he’s bringing her.”
It had been almost five years since Gram had passed away and Ashlyn always made sure to visit the cemetery when she was in town so she could spend some time with she and Gramps. After spending last Christmas in Miami the keeper took Ali and the kids with her to visit their graves when they made it to Satellite Beach at the end of the trip. Ali hadn’t been there in three years and promised herself not to wait so long again. They didn’t spend a ton of time there but Ashlyn really wanted Drew and Josie to meet her Gram and Gramps and she couldn’t think of a better place. She knew they were both too young to have any kind of understanding about what was going on, but she just felt like she needed to bring them all together. After all, it was Christmas.

This year the blonde wanted to take them up to Midway, the tiny town where Gram had grown up and where most of her family was buried. She had never taken Ali there, even though she had meant to show her Gram’s favorite spot on the lake. Somehow making the hour-long drive up there kept falling down the list of things to do during their vacations. And once they had Drew it got even harder to make the trip. It was silly and she knew it as she thought those thoughts during the drive on Tuesday morning. It was only an hour and she was ashamed of herself for not at least bringing Ali there yet. The brunette had told her more than once that she wanted to see the lake and the old cemetery where Ashlyn had gotten their son’s middle name. Everything looked and felt the same as it had four years and nine months ago when the keeper had driven her grandmother to her childhood home by the lake. The house looked to be in even worse condition now and the broken-down car on cinder blocks was almost completely overgrown by long, weedy grass.

“Wow” Ali said softly as she took in the sight. It was just as Ashlyn had described it to her after her first visit, but seeing it was something else.

There didn’t seem to be anybody home, but the keeper went and knocked on the door anyway. She waited slightly longer than was necessary but she thought she owed them that because they had been so kind to her the last time she visited with Gram. She walked back to the car and got Drew out of his carseat. He was 3-1/2 years old now and could probably walk the distance with no trouble but Ashlyn wasn’t sure what the trail was like, or if there even was a trail anymore, and she didn’t want to take any chances. Ali lifted him up onto his mama’s back, which was by far his favorite way to travel, and then lifted 17-month old Josie onto her own hip and followed her wife across the side yard towards the trail. It was warm, mid-70s, but overcast and cloudy and before too long they were carefully stepping over the big roots that were sticking up out of the path.

“It’s not much farther now” Ashlyn called out over her shoulder as she remembered carrying Gram from that point on.

She felt her chest tighten when she thought about the conversation they had had about what beautiful babies she and Ali would have. She paused and took a minute to catch her breath and Ali walked past her and turned around so she could look at her face. She frowned sadly when she saw the tears in her eyes.

“You ok babe?” she caressed her arm and then reached up and cupped her cheek.

“Yeah” Ashlyn nodded and blinked a few times. “This was as far as the wheelchair would go…”

Ali frowned again, knowing the rest of the story almost by heart. Ashlyn had relived that day a hundred times the year Gram passed away and the brunette never got tired of hearing it. If the keeper was having a particularly hard time or a bad day Ali would come up behind her and hug her and ask her to tell her the story. She didn’t have to say which story. They both knew. And it worked like magic. Like Gram’s magic, every time. When she was finished with the story Ashlyn always felt better. She felt closer to the woman who had meant so much to her and also to her wife.

“Well let’s keep going so these beautiful babies can see their Great-Grandmother’s favorite lake,
They spent about an hour there, trying to keep the kids out of the water and the mud. Ashlyn was pleased to see what looked to be a hand-made bench waiting for them when they got to the clearing by the water. And she was even happier when she sat on it and it actually supported her weight.

“Will you tell us the story?” Ali asked, from her seat next to her wife on the bench. She reached over and put her hand on Ashlyn’s belly, which they still thought contained only one baby. “All of us?”

It took a lot longer to tell the story with Drew asking questions but it was also a lot more fun. The blonde knew Gram would approve. When they stood up and got ready to go, the keeper took a minute and said a silent prayer of thanks as she stood by the edge of the lake and looked out over the quietly lapping water. Ali kept the kids up by the mouth of the trail to give her wife the moment she needed before joining them for the walk back to the car.

“What you doin’ mama?” Drew asked as he watched Ashlyn wiping the dirt off of one of the three flat, neglected headstones. She pulled the overgrown grass from around the edges, just as Gram had done before. He stood next to his mama with his hand on her back as she worked, gently patting her as if she was one of the dogs.

“We need to make them look nice again” she explained patiently. “Do you want to help me?”

Ali had already knelt down next to one of the other headstones and begun working on it with one hand while she kept the other on the back of Josie’s t-shirt so she wouldn’t wander off. She had just learned to walk in the middle of October and wasn’t very good at it yet but she was eager to practice. When they were almost done with the three headstones the keeper started to talk to her son.

“Do you see this word here?” she asked as she ran her hand across the ‘Holatka’ at the top of the middle headstone in front of her.

The little boy nodded from where he stood, wrapped in Ashlyn’s arm as she knelt on the ground. Ali picked up Josie and held her on her lap and watched the special moment happen. If she had been smarter she would have recorded it for her wife, but she was so engrossed in the moment that it never crossed her mind.

“Well this is a name. Like our last name is Krieger.”

“Kwiegah” he said proudly, recognizing the name from the many times they had practiced it at home.

“That’s right” Ashlyn beamed at the boy. “Good job buddy” she squeezed him and kissed his chubby cheek. “This name here is ‘Holatka’ and this headstone is for your Great-Great-Grandmother and her last name was ‘Holatka’. And that’s a family name for us. Even though our last name is Krieger there are other names that are important in our family and this is one of them. And that’s why we gave it to you for your middle name. What’s your name sweet boy?”

“Dwew!”

“That’s right. And your full name is Andrew Holatka Krieger. And I wanted to bring you here today so you could see where your middle name comes from. Thank you for letting me show it to you Drew.”

“Um-kay mama. Can I have juice now?”

“Yes you sure can bud” she chuckled softly. “Let’s go back to the car and get you some juice” the
keeper grinned at her son as she got to her feet and picked him up.

She lifted him high into the air and spun him around as his squeals of delight filled the heavy air. Ashlyn almost shushed him in that place where people came to pay their respects to the past, but then she spun him around again instead and earned another shout of laughter from the boy. The keeper would always bring her children to this place to honor their family, but she knew it was just as important to respect and honor the present and the future as well. Besides, she thought to herself as she matched her son’s huge grin, the residents of this place would probably enjoy hearing a little fun and laughter now and then too.

Thanksgiving turned out to be a wonderful day. It was 77 degrees and sunny with a nice, light breeze that blew almost all day long. Carol’s beach house was full and hectic and happy from morning to night. Mike Harris’ sister, Aunt Marie, even showed up with both of her grown children, David and Carlin. Carlin and her boyfriend had had a baby girl that year but he was not that interested in being a father or a husband. The family was trying to focus on how beautiful baby Olivia was as they rallied around their heartbroken cousin. But even Carlin, in all her sadness, enjoyed the love and laughter that day. It still threw Ali for a little bit of a loop when they spent the holidays down in Florida. She was just used to the cold weather of New England and it took her a day or so to adjust to being in a bathing suit at the beach on Thanksgiving or Christmas. She wasn’t sure if it was because she was missing her brother or her father or what. But that year she brought one of her favorite Krieger Thanksgiving traditions down to the Harris clan, but with a twist. They played soccer on the beach, right in front of Carol’s house and everyone had a blast. It was not quite as competitive as the games they played in Massachusetts, but pretty close. They got as many of the kids involved as they could, encouraging even the very youngest to participate. The grown-ups were careful with the little ones and the only injuries that happened that afternoon were to people’s pride and egos.

It was hard to say if it was because of the hard lesson she had learned about perspective the year before, or if she had decided to change her tactics after not fully embracing Carol when her mother first revealed their new relationship, but Ashlyn made it a point to make Lydia feel welcome and at ease all day long. She was in her mid 50’s and a little overweight with bleached blonde hair and big boobs. She looked nervous and self-conscious and it was easy to see she didn’t feel like she fit in. Lydia had lived a hard life, you could be sure of that immediately, but she still managed to smile and be present at a big family gathering for someone she clearly cared a lot about. She and Mike were both very quiet for most of the day but it was sweet to watch him dote on her and smile with her as they sat next to each other on the beach watching the soccer game. It was hard for Ashlyn to accept the fact that Lydia and her father spent so much time at a bar on the beach almost every night of their lives, but the only other option was to push them both away. She realized it had been the fear of that very thing that had kept her father from bringing her around until that day and that broke her heart. The keeper would just have to trust that her dad would stay strong and sober. She hoped there was enough enticement and reward for him to succeed – four and soon-to-be five grandchildren who loved and adored him.

When it was time for them to head out that evening, Ashlyn walked with them to Mike’s car and helped them load in the leftovers they were taking home. She hugged Lydia goodbye and watched her buckle herself into the passenger seat. Then the keeper hugged her father goodbye over by his side of the car. He held his daughter tightly and for much longer than usual and she just hugged him back.

“I don’t know what to say” he said softly as he tried hard not to cry as they hugged.

“About what Pop?” Ashlyn asked, pulling her head back so she could look into the most beautiful blue eyes she had ever seen.
“You were so good to her today Bash...thank you” he said as they took a step back and held onto each other’s biceps in a long-distance hug.

“I just want you to be happy Pop. That’s all I care about. Well, that and your sobriety” she couldn’t resist putting the word out there. She felt her father flinch a little when he heard it but then he took a deep breath and sighed. “If she’s good to you and makes you happy then she’s alright with me” the keeper continued earnestly.

Mike pulled his daughter into another hug, squeezing her tight and then releasing her quickly as he moved to open the car door and get in.

“Are we surfing tomorrow morning?” he asked just before closing the car door.

Ashlyn knew he would understand that she wouldn’t be able to do too much because she was being extra careful with her pregnancy. But, as much as they both loved surfing, it really wasn’t about that anyway.

“I’ll be there” she smiled.

Chapter End Notes

So here you go all you smarties who knew immediately that Ashlyn was pregnant with twins! I wasn't trying to keep it a secret but I also wasn't trying to announce it yet either. lol. You're so dang smart! :)

Also if anybody wants to revisit the scene where Ashlyn takes Gram to visit her old home and the lake and the cemetery it's in Part 3, Chapter 37.
The shareholders of Knight-Harris had their end of the year meeting on a Monday afternoon, December 12th, and then went out to a fancy dinner together afterwards to celebrate another successful and profitable year. Jared, Hilary, Ashlyn and Ali all wore nice business clothes, had their closed-door meeting and then drove across the river into Boston for dinner at one of the hot, new restaurants that was impossible to get a reservation at. Every time Ashlyn rode in Hilary’s customized, tricked-out Jeep her heart broke a little and that evening was no exception. Dinner had been a lot of fun and it was times like that when Ali really appreciated how wonderful it was to be able to work with your friends, or, as had happened with Jared, become great friends with the people you work with. They were a tightknit foursome who had been brought closer together that year by the whole Christian Agnew mess. As successful as K-H was, it was still a relatively new company and they were all still learning as they grew. As they finished their desserts the group split up, Hilary to meet some teammates for another celebratory party before they all went to their homes across the country for the holidays. And Jared was hoping to catch up with his boyfriend of almost a year. He was a dancer and he travelled a lot so when he was in Boston Jared tried to spend as much time with him as possible. Ali had told Jared to bring him to dinner but he didn’t want to cross those lines just yet.

Ali and Ashlyn looked at each other when they were alone at the table, with the bill. Ken and Vicki were babysitting for them and it was just after 8pm. It seemed a shame to end the evening so early so they ordered another round of drinks for themselves and moved so they were sitting close together at the back of the corner booth table. Ashlyn had been feeling much better since the week before, her 14th week of pregnancy. She was officially three weeks past the first trimester and her body was reacting accordingly. Her nightly headaches had stopped and so had almost all of her morning sickness. She still had a day or two a week where it would rear its ugly head but, even when it did, it was so much less intense that it barely caused a hiccup to her morning. They snuggled together as close as possible without acting like hormonal teenagers and talked quietly as they enjoyed their alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. It quickly became obvious that the restaurant was ready for them to leave so they could turn the table and get the next paying customers into those seats. Oh well, so much for a fun Monday night out. They took a cab back over to the K-H offices to get Ashlyn’s car and head home.

“Aw, I have to pee again” the blonde groaned as she and her wife walked around to the parking lot behind the building.

“Good thing we know the owners of this nice building here” Ali giggled and tucked herself into her keeper’s side with her hand on Ashlyn’s just-barely-there baby bump. You couldn’t even see it unless you were looking for it and her stomach was bare. All of her clothes still fit her too. But Ali knew it was there and she couldn’t keep her hands away from it. “Better now than halfway to Gloucester” she giggled again and dug her keys out of her purse.

It was the second week in December and Christmas was fast approaching. For the next two weeks the K-H office would become less busy every day. It was by far their quietest time of the year. The
was always somebody in the office during the day, but they spread shifts out and rotated the support staff so everybody got some extra time off to get ready and enjoy the holidays. But at 9pm on a Monday night the building was completely empty. Ali unlocked one of the two back doors that accessed the open-air parking lot and entered her security code into the alarm terminal. She swiped her keycard and punched a few more keys and confirmed that there was nobody else in the building. She locked the door again and told Ashlyn to swipe her keycard too.

“We can’t expect everyone else to follow the rules if we don’t” she urged softly and hugged her wife from behind as she swiped her keycard.

“Hey now” the blonde shifted her hips back into Ali, “watch the bladder.” Ali had just enough alcohol in her system so that when she felt the thrust of her wife’s hips and ass back into her own crotch her mind went right to naughty, sexy places. Before she could act on any of the racy images that were filling her head, Ashlyn spoke again. “Don’t forget the security cameras you had installed...”

That smartened the brunette right up and she released her keeper and moved into the dimly lit building and away from her wife. They didn’t have a ton of security cameras but Ali had felt it was important and smart to have them installed in the wake of the Christian Agnew mess the year before. You just never knew what disgruntled people would do and she didn’t want to take any chances. There was a camera recording all three entrances, the front and both at the back, as well as one in the hallway of each floor that also was able to monitor the elevator there. That was it. They had definitely been on camera when Ali had hugged the blonde just then. There were bathrooms on both the first floor and the second floor as well as in the basement, where the gym and showers were located. Ashlyn walked quickly into the two-stall ladies room near the back door they had just entered and into one of the stalls. Ali followed her in and used the other stall and they smiled at each other in the mirror as they washed their hands a couple of minutes later.

Ashlyn looked amazing. She had always looked gorgeous when she got dressed up and tonight was no exception. But now, almost four months pregnant, she had an extra beautiful glow about her that did things to her wife. The keeper looked like a figure out of one of Raphael’s masterpieces – magnificent and golden and perfect. She wore a beautiful dark brown or russet colored suit with a subtle black crosshatch pattern and a tight, black turtleneck. She had included a black pocket square and her favorite, black, lapel flower pin to go with her black dress shoes and socks. Diamond stud earrings, her ever-present rings, and a big, beautiful watch completed the ensemble for the night. It was a little too dressy for the office but it had been perfect for the fancy dinner.

Ali’s outfit had been the opposite, perfect for the office but a little too business-like for a fancy or romantic dinner. But, in her defense, it had been a celebratory business dinner so it all worked perfectly. She wore one of her many stylish skirt suits, this one a dark grey herringbone pattern with a pencil skirt and a festive red blouse beneath it. Her hair was in a low bun at the back of her neck showing off the beautiful pearl earrings and necklace Ashlyn had given her after Josie’s birth. The 2” black heels she wore brought her height up almost to Ashlyn’s, but not quite. Shorter, more practical heels was something the brunette had come to terms with a few years ago. It was just asking too much of her feet and ankles to carry Drew or Josie around, with whatever bag of crap went with them, while wearing stylish, 3” heels. There were two positives about the change though. First was that a lot of shoe companies had upped their game in the practical, work heel department so some of the shoes she bought and wore were quite cute and still satisfied her shoe obsession a little bit. The second was that Ashlyn loved to be taller than the brunette. By switching to the 2” heel Ali was able to increase her own height to about 5’ 8” while still staying a comfortable inch below her wife’s 5’ 9” height. Win – win.

“Better?” Ali asked as she dried her hands off and stood in front of her wife.
“Much” the keeper smiled and wrapped the brunette in a big hug, her arms low around Ali’s back. They stood and swayed together for a long minute, neither wanting the comfortable contact or the evening to end.

“Are you really tired honey?” Ali asked softly as she kissed her wife’s cheek, right by her ear.

“I’m tired but I feel good. How about you?” Ashlyn moved her hands slowly around the brunette’s back and the very top of her ass.

“Same” Ali hesitated for a second but when she felt Ashlyn pull her in even tighter she moved her mouth up to her keeper’s ear and nibbled on the lobe, just a bit.

They went on like that for ten minutes, each one gradually pushing the boundaries of safe, sweet embrace more towards steamy clinch. Ali knew that once her keeper’s hands spent more than a few seconds on her ass she could be easily corrupted. She knew Ashlyn’s weakness. Similarly, a couple of grazes with her long fingers down the side of Ali’s breasts and Ashlyn knew she would have a writhing, hot and bothered brunette in her arms. Another element of Ali’s pregnancies that Ashlyn had always wondered about, like she wondered about the food cravings, was the libido that had drastically increased. The keeper would never complain because she had loved every minute of it. But part of her found it hard to believe that someone’s appetite for sex could change so much just because of a few hormones. Ashlyn had just crossed the threshold between first trimester and second trimester and she hadn’t experienced the increased urge yet. But that night, in the bathroom, for the first time, her hormones opened up that particular floodgate. There had been no warning. All of a sudden the nice, simmering touches and kisses had turned into raging desire like she had never known before. It hit her so hard and so fast that she thought she was having some sort of episode or heart attack or something. Her heart rate increased dramatically, her underwear got soaked, her hands got sweaty and she found it hard to breathe. She wanted Ali’s body more than she had ever wanted it before, and that was really saying something. The blood rushed to her head and pounded in her ears as she pulled back to look at her wife’s beautiful face in front of her. Her chest was starting to heave and she was practically panting when Ali opened her eyes and took in the sight.

“Are you ok Ash? You look...”

Ali had barely gotten the last word out of her mouth before the keeper’s tongue had pushed its way inside, boldly exploring as she pressed her wife’s body back against the edge of the sink counter. The brunette was momentarily stunned and a little concerned by the odd look she had seen on Ashlyn’s face, but she recovered quickly and tried to keep up with the frenzied pace of the keeper’s kiss. Ashlyn’s hands were roaming everywhere as they kissed. They were on her ass, on her breasts, at her crotch, in her hair all at the same time and it felt desperate and out of control. She was moaning and humming into Ali’s mouth and trying to press her thigh between the brunette’s legs but the tight pencil skirt just didn’t have that kind of give in it.

“Whoa, whoa” Ali finally said once she had managed to pull her wife’s head back by grabbing and pulling the hair at the back of her head.

“Ow” Ashlyn exclaimed and Ali saw her eyes darken even more and her nostrils flare a little bit.

“What’s going on babe?” the brunette had both hands in front of her, palms down on Ashlyn’s chest, keeping her at bay. She wasn’t frightened. Hot, spontaneous sex that got a little rough sometimes would never be anything Ali complained about. She knew Ashlyn would never hurt her in a million years. But she was concerned about her keeper. She wanted to make sure she was ok before things went any further. “Talk to me Ash.”
She gave her wife one quick push with both hands in her chest and that seemed to snap the blonde out of her sex-crazed daze, at least momentarily. Ashlyn literally shook her head as if she was trying to shake cobwebs out of it.

“Oh baby, did I hurt you? I’m so sorry honey. I don’t know what came over me. Can you forgive me? Are you ok? Where did I hurt you?” her words were operating at the same speed everything else had just been, fast and furious. She looked like she was going to cry as her eyes darted around Ali’s face and body trying to figure out where the injury was so she could tend to it. “Where did I hurt you Ali?”

“Ash...Ashlyn...Ashlyn!” she finally had to yell to break through. “I’m fine. You didn’t hurt me. Calm down. Take a few deep breaths with me” she held both of her wife’s hands between their bodies and did a deep breathing exercise that seemed to slow Ashlyn’s everything down just a bit. “That’s better babe” she soothed. “Are you ok?” she studied the blonde’s face and waited for her to open her eyes.

“Yeah, I’m good. I’m good” she breathed out and finally opened her eyes. They were still dark but the frenzy was gone out of them and her breathing had started to slow back down as well. “I’m sorry” she looked down, embarrassed.

“Don’t be sorry Ash” Ali smiled and caressed her cheek with one hand. “That was really hot and if we were anywhere other than a public bathroom we’d probably be having sex right this minute” she chuckled and breathed a small sigh of relief when Ashlyn met her eyes and chuckled too.

The keeper’s least favorite place to have sex was in a public bathroom. The same slight OCD tendencies that made her need to keep her bed as clean as possible made it uncomfortable and slightly torturous for her to have sex in someplace as dirty as a public restroom. They had done it before, but not very often and only in places that she knew well enough to know they were probably pretty clean to start with. Certainly this bathroom at Knight-Harris would qualify in that category but Ali knew that if there were any other options available her girl would always prefer the other option.

“I don’t know what happened” she tried to explain, not really understanding it herself. “I just...fuck, I just wanted you like you were a drug and I was an addict and there was no way I would survive without taking you right that minute.”

“Oh wow” Ali’s eyes went wide. “Is this what I did to you when I was pregnant? Did I...was I...”

“Holy shit” Ashlyn’s jaw dropped. “That’s what this is?”

“I think so” Ali leaned forward and kissed her cheek. It was still very warm and flushed. “Only twice as bad because you’ve got twice the hormones messing around in there.”

“Jesus” Ashlyn closed her eyes and dropped her chin to her chest.

“Come on” Ali tugged on her hand and pulled her towards the bathroom door. “I know what we can do.”

They behaved themselves as they walked across the first-floor lobby to the elevators. Ali brought her wife’s hand to her lips while they were riding up to the fourth floor and slowly, seductively kissed Ashlyn’s knuckles. She could see the want smoldering barely beneath the surface in her keeper’s dark eyes.

“Almost there” she purred, careful to keep some distance between them so they could leave the elevator and walk down the hall to her office without leaving racy camera footage behind.
As soon as Ali closed and locked her office door behind them, Ashlyn roared back to life. She crashed their lips together in a bruising, electrifying kiss and picked the brunette up off the ground by her waist. She wanted to carry her to the leather couch and climb on top of her but they didn’t get very far. Ali’s pencil skirt kept her from wrapping her legs around Ashlyn so they dangled down in front of the keeper and almost made her fall over.

“Hold on a sec” Ali giggled and stepped back as she unhooked and unzipped her skirt. She couldn’t deny how turned on she was by the way the blonde looked at her with eyes like a feral animal. “You too babe, let’s go” she urged as she took off all of her clothes, not wanting anything getting destroyed. They still had to walk out of the building when they were done. “Hurry up” she giggled again as Ashlyn struggled getting the tight turtleneck over her head in her haste.

It had only taken two minutes but it had felt like an eternity before they were both finally naked. Ali felt the passion pool between her legs as she admired her wife in front of her. She had always been gorgeous and sexy as hell, but now that she was all glowy and golden from the pregnancy it was almost too much to take in. Her cheeks were just a tiny bit fuller and there was just the slightest swell to her belly now. The most noticeable change was to her breasts which were larger, but not huge yet, and the areola around each of her nipples was bigger and darker. Her pretty pink nipples were going to change color and get darker and darker, just as Ali’s had. Fuck she was magnificent. And she was all hers. The brunette was going to make sure to enjoy this special time in their lives, or die trying.

It wasn’t very glamorous but it was hot and urgent and noisy. They hadn’t had that kind of primal, wanton sex in a long time and they both loved it. After standing in front of the couch making out and groping and scratching every inch of flesh they could reach, Ashlyn finally picked her wife up again, unable to hold back any longer. Ali wrapped her strong legs around her waist and her arms around her neck and moaned at the seductive feeling of being light as a feather, if only for a minute. The keeper dug her short nails into Ali’s fleshy ass and squeezed so hard she actually broke the skin in two places. Ali hissed and then groaned loudly into Ashlyn’s neck, biting her roughly in return.

“Oooh, shit” Ashlyn exhaled and winced.

She knelt on the couch and lifted Ali up and sat her ass on top of the back of the couch, surprising the brunette who looked back at her with eyes so lidded she could barely see out of them. Ali grabbed a handful of blonde hair at the top of her wife’s head and jerked it to the side as she spread her legs wide. Ashlyn moaned low and deep in her throat at the hairpull and at the sight of her brunette’s beautiful pussy waiting for her. She ran her big hands and long fingers down both of Ali’s legs and then back up, raking her fingertips along her skin. She slid the back of her hand up through her wife’s soaking wet folds and closed her eyes at the sensation, as desire and lust raced through her entire body.

“Yes” Ali said hoarsely as she leaned back against the wall, her hand still clutching blonde locks and pulling her keeper’s head with her.

Ashlyn felt like she was going to completely lose her mind. She was trying hard to retain some kind of control but she was losing the battle with every passing minute. She was fast approaching that moment where she would feel overwhelmed and have to stop for a minute or two. Fuck that. She was not stopping tonight. No fucking way. She let Ali pull her head towards her and then took over the motion. The keeper brought her lips to her wife’s breasts and sucked one into her mouth, hard. Ali moaned and moved her hand to the back of Ashlyn’s head and held it tightly to her breast.

“Damn babe...mmmmmmmmmm...”

Ali’s other hand was scratching up and down her keeper’s back and side. Ashlyn moved a hand behind her wife and found her ass again, squeezing and massaging it. Her mouth hungrily ravaged
Ali’s breasts with licks and sucks and a couple of bites as well. As all of this was in motion, working both women into a lather, the keeper brought her right hand up and played with the brunette’s pussy lips. She teased her entrance and dragged her fingers through her folds before moving up to tap at her clit a few times. Ali groaned and her whole body jerked in response while she held her keeper’s head even tighter against her chest.

“Fuck Ash...I need you so bad babe...please...”

Ali’s voice didn’t even sound like her own. It was husky and raspy and raw and she practically growled when Ashlyn shoved two fingers deep inside her with no warning.

“Oh my God...yes!!” she yelled and pulled harder on the blonde’s back and head, wanting their bodies to somehow fuse together into one living, breathing, fucking animal.

Ashlyn felt like she was drunk. She felt a little dizzy and a little unsteady but she knew she wouldn’t fall far if she lost her balance for a second. She could feel her wife’s strong arms holding her firmly in place. Those arms would never let her fall. The keeper was urged on by the sounds coming from Ali’s mouth as well as the sounds coming from her wet center. That magical sound of flesh slamming into wet flesh filled the room and Ashlyn’s ears and she swore she had never heard a more beautiful symphony.

“Unnnnnhhh, Jesus, yes babe...yes...”

She could feel the brunette starting her final climb and brought her left hand to her aching clit. For a split second she didn’t want to touch it because she knew as soon as she did her beautiful brunette would come crashing down around her and this incredible moment would come to an end. Ashlyn wanted to stay in this moment, suspended just as they were, forever. But she knew they couldn’t. She knew she would never be able to deny the woman she loved her pleasure, her release, her ecstasy. It didn’t take long. She rubbed Ali’s clit steadily for no more than a couple of minutes and the brunette fell over the edge as her orgasm carried her away.

“Ashlyn!!!” she shouted and groaned once more as her body jolted forward, bending over the blonde’s shoulder, their sweaty skin sliding against each other as Ali’s body twitched and shook in her keeper’s strong arms. “Unnnnnhhhh...fuck...unnnhhhh...”

Ashlyn held her wife in her arms and carefully lowered her onto her lap from the back of the couch. Ali wrapped her arms and legs around her keeper as best she could, she could barely feel them at the moment, while Ashlyn held her close with both arms behind her back and her face buried in the brunette’s hot neck. Neither of them moved for almost ten minutes. Ashlyn loved the way she could hear and feel Ali’s heart pounding and then beating inside her chest. They held each other and breathed and loved and it was incredible. Just as the brunette was about to move, she had finally regained control of her limbs and she was afraid that she was too heavy for her wife in her kneeling position, she felt something wet slide down her chest. At first she thought she was still sweating and started to get a little embarrassed. But then she realized that Ashlyn was crying. The blonde’s body was barely moving and she didn’t make a sound, but silent tears slipped down her cheeks as they held each other.

“Honey, are you ok?” she asked softly, moving her head back so she could look down at her chest and check on her keeper there. But Ashlyn didn’t answer. “Here, let me get off your legs, they must be killing you...”

“No” she complained loudly and shook her head from side to side when she felt Ali unwrap her legs from behind her back. “Stay, please stay. I don’t ever want to let you go.”
“Aw sweetheart I’m not going anywhere, I promise” Ali kissed the top of her head and left her lips there for a minute. “Let’s just sit sideways so you can stretch your legs out, ok?”

That was agreeable to the emotional blonde and they repositioned themselves at a right angle so Ashlyn was sitting sideways on the couch with her legs out straight, with Ali still on her lap and holding her tight. Her tears had stopped sometime during the position shift and all that was left now was soft, steady breathing that tickled the brunette’s breasts.

“That was amazing babe” Ali cooed and kissed her head again after another few minutes of quiet. “You were amazing. You make me so crazy, I swear” she chuckled as she kept rubbing her wife’s back and playing with the back off her neck. “I can’t believe how good you make me feel Ash.”

“I love you Ali.” Ashlyn’s voice was small and soft and she pressed a kiss into her wife’s chest after she spoke. “I just...love you so much.”

“I love you too” she leaned down and waited for her keeper to lift her head up so she could kiss her tear-stained lips. They kissed for a minute, just a soft, gentle kiss, and Ashlyn sat up a little bit straighter. “Is everything ok?” the brunette asked tenderly, brushing the few remaining tears off of her love’s face. “Why were you crying honey?”

“Oh” she sighed and gave her sweet wife a bashful smile. “I have no idea what went on there” she shrugged. “That was one of the strangest, but best” she was quick to add the best so Ali didn’t think the wrong thing, “sexual experiences I’ve ever had in my life. Just don’t ask me to explain it” she chuckled and leaned up for another kiss.

“Well I hate to bring this up, but you haven’t even come yet...at least, I don’t think you did” Ali looked at her wife and raised her eyebrows. “Did you? Because, I’ll be honest, I kind of zoned out there for a few minutes” she giggled through her confession and watched her keeper’s face for her reaction.

Ashlyn smiled at her adorable wife and patted her ass as she kissed her shoulder.

“No I didn’t come but I almost feel like I don’t need to” she scrunched her face up in confusion. “It’s hard to describe.”

“Well you are definitely coming tonight babe, whether it’s here or when we get home...”

“Aw man” Ashlyn whined and dropped her head.

“Umm, that’s definitely not the correct response...”

“No, that sounds great” she corrected herself and wagged her eyebrows. “But I have to pee again” she groaned. “God I thought it was annoying when you had to pee all the time. I’m driving myself crazy already and I’m barely into my second trimester.”

Ali chose to let the ‘annoying’ barb go, her wife was clearly struggling with her hormones that night and this was one of those free passes the brunette had talked about earlier.

“Well get used to it” the brunette pecked her lips sweetly as she got up off her lap to help her wife get dressed. “It only gets more annoying.”

“Holy shit Al, did I do that to you?” Ashlyn gasped as she looked at the two bloody scratch marks on her wife’s ass, one on each cheek.

Ali passed her palms over her ass, winced a little bit and then chuckled.
“A couple of love bites never hurt anybody” she winked at the blonde. “So don’t ask me to apologize for the one on your neck either.”

They investigated the three additional love bites around Ali’s breasts as they got dressed and Ashlyn gently kissed each one as she apologized. Rough sex wasn’t really their thing but it was always a nice change of pace when it happened and neither woman would complain.

By the time Ashlyn had gotten her clothes back on so she could go downstairs to use the bathroom again, they just decided to head home and finish what they started once they were in their own bed. After chatting with Ken and Vicki about their afternoon and evening with the kids and then releasing them from duty, Ali and Ashlyn climbed the backstairs together. They took their time and had slower, softer, safer sex and delivered the keeper her orgasm. She came hard and cried again as she came down, cradled safely in her wife’s arms.

“I don’t know what’s the matter with me” she whimpered. “I just feel like crying, but I’m not sad or upset.”

“It’s ok” Ali held her and reassured her and placed gentle kisses to Ashlyn’s face in her lap as they talked. “That’s how it is when I cry after sex sometimes” she explained. “It just comes from somewhere inside and doesn’t really mean anything. Don’t worry about it honey. I’ve got you and I’m never letting you go, ever.”

“No matter what?” the keeper’s voice was small and quiet.

“No matter what babe.”

It was almost midnight and they were both exhausted. Ali could see her wife’s eyelids starting to lose their battle to stay open. She was thankful that they had already gotten ready for bed, washing their faces, removing their contacts, brushing their teeth, and moisturizing before enjoying their bodies again. But at that exact moment the brunette would pay a large amount of money if they could just pull the covers up over their naked bodies and fall asleep. Instead, she eased the sleepy blonde head out of her lap and got out of bed to unlock both bedroom doors and put pajamas on. She pulled a fresh pair of sleep shorts and t-shirt out of Ashlyn’s dresser and walked back over to the bed, smiling as she observed her wife’s naked body again. Ashlyn had rolled over onto her stomach and Ali nodded approvingly when she saw her. She knew her keeper wouldn’t be able to sleep like that for much longer once her belly started to get bigger and she was glad she was taking advantage of it while she could.

The brunette stood at Ashlyn’s side of the bed, between her outstretched feet that hung off the edge of the bed, and admired her sleeping form. She knelt on the bed, between her wife’s knees, and gently smoothed her hand over the schooner tattoo on the back of Ashlyn’s right thigh. She ran her finger down the foremast of the ship and across the latest addition to the visual representation of their family – Josie’s name and date of birth. She took a minute and looked over the rest of the intricately detailed tattoo, wondering where her keeper would put the two new names that were coming in five short months. It was only a two-masted schooner so she would have to get creative. Ali knew her wife probably already had the answer in mind. She smiled and bent over, kissing her children’s names inked forever onto the love of her life’s skin. Ashlyn’s thigh quivered under her touch, even in sleep, and the brunette got back to the task at hand.

She slid the shorts up over both legs to the middle of the blonde’s thighs. Ali knelt next to her hips and tapped them with enough pressure so that her wife lifted them up an inch or so without waking up all the way while the brunette pulled the shorts up and into place. She patted her butt when she was done and placed a kiss to each cheek before moving up towards her keeper’s torso.
“Come on babe, sit up so I can put your shirt on and get you into bed” Ali urged with a gentle shake of her wife’s shoulder.

Ashlyn whimpered and rolled onto her side, facing Ali, after the third such gentle shake. The brunette put the one arm she could reach through the short sleeve and then coaxed her again.

“Ashlyn, please honey, sit up” she whined a little herself without meaning to. “I want to go to sleep too.”

The blonde blinked her eyes open and squinted at her wife kneeling in front of her on the bed.

“Hi” she said softly and smiled adorably at the same time.

“Hi” Ali returned the sweet smile, unable to resist her wife’s cuteness. “Can you please sit up?”

Ashlyn stretched and then sat up. She let Ali finish putting her shirt on her and then moved to her regular sleeping spot in the bed. The brunette got into her spot and pulled the covers up over them both with a contented sigh. The keeper rolled over onto her right side and reached behind her to pull Ali behind her as the big spoon, which made the brunette chuckle.

“Will you hold me baby?”

Ali bent her head and pressed a kiss into Ashlyn’s shoulder, and then one below her ear as she wrapped her arm around her middle and pulled her keeper back into her tight.

“All night, my love.”
Ali finally bit the bullet and agreed to be the bigger person, as she had been all her life even though she was comparing herself to her aunt who was a grown up before Ali was even born.

“I’m just so sick of her bullshit” she complained angrily one afternoon while she worked out in the basement gym. Ashlyn was riding the recumbent bike they had purchased just for her to use during her pregnancy because it didn’t put any downward strain on her cervix and had been approved by Dr. Comello. “I mean, honestly, she’s 64 fucking years old and I have to be the one to take the high road?”

“I’m proud of you honey” the keeper huffed out, cheeks pink from exertion. “Everybody knows you’re right and she’s wrong, you’re good and she’s awful.”

“Well I’m not just going to let her pretend that phone call didn’t happen. She can fake it but if it comes up I’m not playing her ridiculous game.”

“I still can’t believe she was ‘sick’ last Thanksgiving” Ashlyn chuckled. “Like anybody believed her.”

Thanksgiving last year, in 2021, would have been the first time Ali and Aunt Becky had seen each other since the niece called up the aunt and bitched her out for saying horrible things that Meg overheard at Kyle’s wedding reception in August three months earlier. Ken and Vicki were hosting Thanksgiving and all of the Scott Kriegers came except for Aunt Becky who had to stay home sick at the last second. Then Ashlyn and Ali had taken their kids to Miami for Christmas so there was no chance of seeing her then. And this past Thanksgiving they had gone to Satellite Beach and Melbourne Beach and missed the big showdown again. So this Christmas was the first time the two women were going to see each other since that phone call. Ali had called her Uncle Scott and her two cousins that she was closest with, Rachael and Vivian, and apologized for losing her cool and all three of them had told her not to worry about it. They agreed with her that Becky’s mouth was often out of line. So there was peace in the family, which was the brunette’s main concern. But Becky hadn’t said one word to Ali and the brunette certainly wasn’t going to call her to apologize for a damned thing.

She hadn’t even been that bitchy during the phone call. She was short and direct and told her aunt that in the future she would appreciate it if she could keep her horrible opinions to herself and, if she couldn’t manage to do that, that she should at least look around and make sure the person she was talking about wasn’t standing within earshot. Aunt Becky played dumb and Ali told her point blank that Meg had overheard her conversation at the reception and had been very upset by it. The fucking cow hadn’t even apologized. She just didn’t say anything at all after that and that was the end of it as far as she was concerned. Ali told her that she owed her family, especially Meg, an apology and that they were looking forward to receiving it. Aunt Becky had just ended the call. She fucking hung up, just like that. Well, even if Ali and her family had to drive all the way to the boondocks in New Hampshire to get that apology, they were going to get it.

“But we all let her get away with it” Ali fumed. “We just accepted her lie and went on with the day like it was no big deal.”

“Listen honey, I know you’re upset. That hag has been hurting your feelings and pissing you off probably since Kyle first came out. But, just... choose your battles” she cautioned carefully. “I mean, Meg’s not even here and she’s the one who deserves the apology the most.”
Ali’s anger flared but she was mad at the situation, not her wife. Ashlyn was absolutely right and the fired-up brunette knew it. She thought back to the times she had talked her keeper out of calling Aunt Becky out for some of the things she had said at family gatherings. She had told the blonde to just let it go, that it wasn’t worth her energy or her time and that the old beast wasn’t going to change anyway. Now here was Ashlyn reversing their roles. They were both quiet for several minutes, concentrating on their workouts while the kids napped. Finally Ali finished her set with the weights and wiped her sweaty face with a towel.

“You’re right” she sighed. “She’s not worth the trouble. Fucking bitch.” She took a deep breath and blew it out. “I won’t say anything. But I swear to God, if I hear her say one thing... you’d better be ready to drag me out of there.”

But Aunt Becky had been on her best behavior. She even went so far as to fawn all over Drew and especially Josie that evening, showering them with compliments. Ali knew that was supposed to be her way of apologizing. What a joke. But everybody else was kind and welcoming, as they usually were, and the young Krieger family ended up having a very nice time. The brunette was especially touched when her Uncle Scott walked them out to the truck and thanked them again for coming. She knew by that gesture and the length and strength of his hug goodbye that he understood and appreciated the sacrifice she had made to be there.

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It wasn’t until Ashlyn’s 19-week appointment on January 10th, 2023 that they got complete confirmation on the sex of the twins. The 16-week appointment in mid-December just wasn’t conclusive. Dr. Comello chatted with Ashlyn and Ali as she got the ultrasound set up that January morning.

“That sounds like a great vacation Patty” Ali enthused after hearing about the doctor’s holiday vacation to Disney World with her family. “We stayed home this year and kept it kind of quiet, which was perfect, for me anyway” she looked at her wife so she could put her own two cents in. Ali hated couples who always said ‘we’ about everything and spoke for each other as if the other spouse didn’t have their own brain or their own interests or their own opinions. “Ash?”

“It was perfect but we did a lot more than just stay home” she corrected with a wink. “We brought these guys with us for one of my favorite days in a long time” she patted her belly, smiled softly at her wife and squeezed her hand. “We try to go to the Nutcracker every year and this year we squeezed in a trip to the Gardner Museum in the afternoon too.”

“Yeah, we thought we’d give them one big day of culture to make up for the rest of the time we’re watching reality tv and cartoons” the brunette giggled.

“Oh we’re not that bad” Ashlyn countered. “We read to them all the time, the good stuff too, not just the cute stuff.”

“Oh really?” Dr. Comello was ready to start the ultrasound but was very amused by their conversation. “Are you reading them Chaucer and Baldwin and Shakespeare?” she chuckled.

“Well, not that good” the keeper smiled bashfully at the doctor as she spread the jelly all over her stomach. “But Thoreau and lots of poetry and, of course, ‘The Little Prince’. That’s Ali’s favorite. We all love it.”

They made some more small talk while the doctor reviewed her tablet for a couple of minutes.

“All of your test results look good Ashlyn. You’ve gained almost 10 pounds total so far. Whatever
“It’s so much easier when you don’t have to go to work every day” the keeper offered. “I don’t know how women do this and work full-time.”

“You’ve been working though” Ali interjected. “Not as much in December, but you’re going to New York for the draft broadcast this Friday and you’ve had to do all of that research on all the college players…”

“Yeah but I can do that sitting on my bed with my laptop. It’s not like driving to a 9 to 5 job every day and sitting at a desk. That’s all I’m saying.”

“It’s different for everybody” Patty replied as she moved the ultrasound wand around Ashlyn’s belly. “A lot of those people at their desks think a job like you have sounds way more stressful than what they’re doing. It is easier to be pregnant if you work from home, in my opinion, and a lot of companies are starting to move toward flexible scheduling too, which helps a lot.”

Ali hated when Ashlyn made it sound like she didn’t work hard. She was just being modest and the brunette always wanted her wife to get the credit she deserved and earned. Ashlyn had worked hard all year long on the Lifetime TV interviews, well, starting in April. And then she had gone to Houston for Championship week at the end of October and been part of the broadcast team for both the runner-up game and the Championship game. She even had to fly home for her 8-week appointment in the middle of the week and then turn right around and go back to Houston for the rest of the week. She was the sideline reporter and she had done a great job on both matches. And she’d been working hard getting the Mental Health Initiative up and running in and around her soccer schedule. The interview video she had done, with Lady Gaga, was going to air later in January and everybody was hoping it was going to be a real launching point for the organization and its growing membership. The point was, Ashlyn wasn’t just sitting home with her feet up, relaxing. Ali got defensive on her wife’s behalf. She always had and she probably always would.

“This looks like our best angle here” Patty commented after several minutes when she found an image on the monitor that showed both babies pretty clearly. “Yes. This is perfect. What lovely, cooperative babies we have today” she chuckled. “And there we have it. Do you want to know the sex? Last chance to speak up.”

“Yeah, we do want to know” Ashlyn glanced excitedly at her wife and they squeezed hands again.

“Ok, so the baby who is positioned lowest in your uterus is called ‘Baby A’ and the one who’s up higher is ‘Baby B’. Historically, they called him or her ‘Baby A’ because he or she was the one that was delivered first, in a vaginal delivery anyway. So that’s the history behind it. If you’re having same-sex twins and one of them has a condition that we know about in advance and requires us to start treatment on right away in the delivery room, then it’s really helpful to use these identifiers.”

“But…” Ali leaned forward expectantly.

“But” Patty smiled at the brunette’s impatience. “In your case we’ll be able to tell them apart pretty easily because you’re going to have a boy and a girl.”

“Oh my God Ash” Ali turned to look at her wife. “You’re going to have your perfect family! Two boys and two girls so everybody has a brother and a sister!”

“I can’t believe it” Ashlyn whispered as she watched the monitor.

“Which one’s which?” Ali asked eagerly.
“Baby A, the one down here closer to your cervix, is your son. And Baby B, over here, is your daughter.”

“Now sometimes they switch positions on us and try to play tricks on us, but we’ve got the most foolproof identifier you can have helping us out this time” Patty chuckled as the monitor very clearly showed Baby A and his teeny tiny little penis. “Congratulations you two. I’m really happy for you.”

Later that night Ashlyn had stretched out on the living room couch with her head in the corner of the ‘L’ bend, propped up on a couple of pillows. There was a soccer game on the tv, turned down low, and the blonde lay on her back with her eyes closed and a tiny smile on her face as the events of the day ran through her busy mind. Ali came down the front stairs, turned into the living room and crawled up the couch and between her wife’s long legs.

“That took a long time, everything ok?” the keeper asked without opening her eyes.

“No, poor little one’s teeth are bothering her so much” the brunette frowned as she kissed her keeper’s lips and then backed down and settled herself onto Ashlyn’s stomach, her head on her chest, the rest of her body on the couch between her legs. She froze for a second, eyes going wide. “Is this ok? I keep forgetting there are two babies in there and what felt ok for me at five months might not feel good for you.”

Ashlyn chuckled and started slowly rubbing her wife’s back and sides and arms as they talked.

“It’s fine. It’s better than fine, I love it.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to squish you, but...I know I won’t be able to do this pretty soon.”

“I love it, let’s get this position the love it deserves before we can’t do it again for a while. Excellent plan” Ashlyn leaned forward and kissed the brunette head on her chest. “What’d you finally do for Josie?”

“I gave her some children’s Tylenol, hopefully she’ll be able to sleep. She’s getting her upper molars which are the most painful.”

“I remember when Drew got his in. Brutal. And then the lower ones come in right after, right?”

“Yeah, well his did, within a month anyway, so I’m guessing hers will too” Ali took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, willing herself to relax and enjoy the moment of quiet and stillness. They were both silent for a few minutes, just breathing and thinking and softly caressing each other. “I’ll go to the dry cleaner tomorrow, put out what you want me to take in.”

“Ok, thanks baby.”

“Do you have everything you need for Friday? Kyle’s excited to have you stay with them. I wish I was going with you.”

“Yeah, I’m all set. It’s just the one night...”

“You know you can stay Saturday night too if you want. You know, if you just want to have some peace and quiet...”

“But you’ll be here” Ashlyn stated, like it was the most obvious reason in the world for her to come right back home after emceeing the NWSL Draft Friday night.
“I know silly” Ali giggled. “I’m just saying, if you’re having fun with Kyle and Nathan on Saturday and you want to stay another night, you should do it. That’s all.”

“I’m away from home enough” the keeper sighed. “I hate it.”

“Well I hate it when you’re gone too. So hurry home Saturday then” she turned her head and kissed Ashlyn’s chest. “We’ll relax and snuggle with the kids and the dogs and just have a lazy day.”

“That sounds so good, I don’t want to go at all” she whined.

They were quiet again and Ali reached over to pat Persey who had just gotten up and come back from getting a drink of water. She stood next to the couch wagging her tail expectantly.

“I can’t believe we’re having a boy and a girl” Ali shook her head and chuckled in disbelief. “It’s just too...”

“Perfect?”

“I don’t know. But I’m convinced Gram and Grandma Lilian are up there looking out for us more than ever.”

“I love that idea” Ashlyn grinned.

“You know what this means, don’t you?” Ali lifted her head and quirked an eyebrow at her wife.

“I sure do” the keeper kept on grinning. “It means we’re going to have a little boy named Dodge Krieger.”

“Oh my God” Ali laughed, got up on her elbows and looked at her wife’s beaming face. “You’re too much. Yes, it means we’re going to have a little boy named Dodge...”

“Really?!”

“Of course. I keep my promises. And I love that name. I told you that 3-1/2 years ago” she giggled and kissed her exuberant wife soundly before settling back into her previous position.

“Wait, so what were you going to say?” the keeper realized their baby boy’s name wasn’t what Ali had been getting at.

“Oh, just that these twins have completely saved our asses with the godparents thing too...”

“Holy shit” Ashlyn’s eyes went wide. “That’s awesome! I hadn’t even thought of that. Damn, that’s a huge, potentially painful and awkward problem solved right there.”

“I’m telling you, Gram and Grandma Lilian have totally got our backs. There’s just no other way to explain it” the brunette squeezed her wife, carefully, and kissed her chest again.

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Ali and Ashlyn had taken a vacation together before the births of both of their children. For Drew’s pregnancy they had celebrated their 2-week honeymoon in Hawaii in January, while Ali was 5-months pregnant and then even squeezed in a little bubble time at the big old house the month before he was born. For Josie’s pregnancy they had managed only a 4-day weekend in the Bahamas, feeling guilty about asking their friends and family to babysit a not-quite-2-year old Drew for longer than that. They were new parents then and didn’t know any better. But now they knew it was ok to ask for help with their kids so they could get away every once in a while. They had asked for a lot of
help last year as Ali made sure to give her wife a fun and exciting 2022. And they both knew that they wouldn’t ask for much help this year, aside from the vital assistance they wouldn’t be able to survive without after the babies were born. But other than that, they knew they were going to be hunkering down in the big old house for the foreseeable future after the twins joined the family. No trips for a while.

So on Friday, February 3rd, the two moms boarded a plane with Drew and Josie and flew to Miami. Ken and Vicki had the dogs for the week and Deb, Mike, Kyle and Nathan were babysitting the kids at the Christopher’s house. The moms were pretty sure that some of the Harrises would be making the 3-hour drive for at least one of the weekends as well. Ali rented a tricked-out, 4-door Jeep Wrangler that had half doors and a soft top that she knew her wife would want to take off as soon as possible. They got up Saturday morning, helped with that first breakfast, and then started their drive through the Florida Keys to Key West. The drive could be made in just over three hours if traffic was good, but they weren’t in a hurry. The keeper enjoyed the drive almost as much as she expected to enjoy anything else that week, well, except having all the sex she wanted with her gorgeous wife. Both Ali and Ashlyn had made the drive to Key West before, but never together. Neither of them had been there in the last fifteen years and they were looking forward to spending a full week relaxing and enjoying themselves in the southern-most part of the United States. They took their time as they drove down scenic Route 1 South, stopping a couple of times just so Ashlyn could use the bathroom.

They made it all the way to Cudjoe Key, a little more than two/thirds of the way to their destination, before stopping for lunch and enjoying a delicious meal right on the beach. Ali had requested an early check-in at their oceanside resort hotel and was glad she did. As excited as she was by the jeep and the drive and the beginning of their vacation, Ashlyn needed a nap. The hotel was right on the beach on the south side of the Key and it was beautiful. It somehow managed to keep the laid-back charm and feel of Key West while delivering top-notch, high-end resort hotel quality amenities and services. The main building of the resort, which had been all there was to the hotel before they added-on and more than doubled the size of the business, was listed on the National Historic Register. It was vintage, old, Spanish-influenced ‘Florida’ with whitewashed walls and a red tiled roof. Their room was medium-sized and airy, with a sliding door that faced South and opened onto a balcony that looked out onto the beach and ocean. It had a king-size bed along the right side of the room and then a couch with coffee table on the left side of the room, closer to the sliding door. The bathroom had a soaking tub for two as well as a big, glass shower with dual heads, a bench and some grab bars. Ashlyn’s eyes lit up when she saw that and Ali knew they’d be having lots of shower sex that week. She didn’t hate the idea. She was so grateful for her keeper carrying their twins that she would do almost anything for her, no questions asked.

Ashlyn was just starting her sixth month of pregnancy, the last of her second trimester. She had gained about 18 pounds and her baby bump was definitely showing. She joked that all 18 of those pounds was in her boobs. They were almost two cup sizes bigger than usual and the keeper barely knew what to do with them. She had never bought or owned more bras in her life. Ashlyn didn’t know if she could survive for a year without wearing a sports bra. But that stalwart of her wardrobe had become useless to her months ago and she knew she’d be practically living in different, supportive nursing bras for, hopefully, another year and a half or so. She had the usual pregnancy symptoms for this stage of the game. She had two humans in her belly that were taking up a lot of room normally used by her stomach, lungs and intestines. She found it hard to breath sometimes and, in addition to the heartburn, constipation and bloating that almost all pregnant women experience in the second trimester, her gums had started to bleed every now and then when she brushed her teeth. It was perfectly normal and was a result of having so much blood coursing throughout her body as it took care of the two babies, but it still freaked her out. Ali hadn’t had that problem, but she also hadn’t carried twins. Ashlyn knew those discomforts were just a glimpse of what was to come during
her third trimester. She had watched Ali grow so big it had become difficult to move around very much or sleep at night and knew she was in for the same and probably worse. The keeper had joined an online support group for mommies of twins and was constantly telling Ali what so and so ‘from the twins group’ had said about one thing or another. The blonde was nervous but excited and she had started documenting everything in her journal each night before bed.

Ashlyn was in the sweet spot of her pregnancy. She was past the grueling symptoms and the morning sickness of the first trimester but not into the extremely uncomfortable third trimester. She was doing an excellent job with her healthy eating plan and Dr. Comello praised her for being in such great shape. Their son was lower and more on her right side while their daughter was a little higher up and more on the keeper’s left side, according to the last ultrasound from her 22-week appointment earlier that week. Both babies also appeared to be thriving and growing as expected. Patty had warned her that once they started moving around she was probably going to be in for a lot of activity with plenty of kicks from both babies. The doctor knew the women were going on vacation and she didn’t want them to worry about any of that while they were away and trying to relax.

“I was kind of bummed to have to get out of the jeep” the keeper confessed once they got into their room that first afternoon. “But not anymore. This is awesome. Look at that huge bed! I might not get out of it all week” she teased on her way to the bathroom to relieve her bladder. Again. “Open the slider will you?” she called out as she sat on the toilet, admiring the bathroom amenities again.

When she was finished in the bathroom Ashlyn crossed the main room, walked out onto the balcony and hugged her wife from behind. The weather in Key West at the beginning of February was mild and beautiful. High temperatures were usually in the mid to high 70’s while the low temperature was in the mid 60’s. Heavenly. The resort and the rest of Key West was busy and full of tourists who had come for a winter vacation. Everything would have been less busy and less expensive if they had waited until the middle or end of March but Ali didn’t want to wait. She wanted to make sure Ashlyn had this vacation while she was feeling good and in the sweet spot.

“Hey you” Ali turned her head to the side and nuzzled into the kiss her keeper pressed into her cheek. “Are you doing ok? Is your back sore after doing all that driving?”

“Yeah, a little” Ashlyn shrugged and rested her chin on top of Ali’s shoulder as they both looked out at the Straits of Florida that connected the Gulf of Mexico to the West and the Atlantic Ocean to the East. “But I’m good. I’m so happy we’re doing this. Thank you sugarplum” she kissed Ali’s cheek again and gave her another squeeze.

“Mmmmm. I’m glad too. I just want to relax and take care of you babe. Will you let me do that this week? Please?”

Much as Ali had during both of her pregnancies, Ashlyn had bristled at many of the extra attempts her wife had made to do things for her or help her with the most basic day-to-day things. It had been an eye-opening experience for both women as they got a first-hand feel for what the other had gone through before. Even though Ali remembered perfectly well how annoying it could be when her keeper tried to carry every single thing for her, no matter how small or light. The brunette was incapable of stopping herself from trying to do the same exact thing for Ashlyn now that the shoe was on the other foot. Likewise, the blonde realized just how suffocating it could feel to have your wife hover over you, watching everything you did and noting everything you ate or drank. She was stunned, honestly amazed, that Ali hadn’t taken her head off a hundred times during each pregnancy for doing that to her. What they each realized was that they had married well and their wife was patient, kind, thoughtful and attentive. It was hard to find fault with anything when they thought about it from that perspective.
“How about we let the people we’re paying this money to here at this fancy hotel take care of both of us instead?” Ashlyn proposed with a smile. She felt her wife’s shoulders slump in disappointment and felt bad. She remembered how much she wanted to take care of her beautiful brunette and loved it when Ali had let her. “Hey, how about you rub my back before I take my nap? I think it’s been long enough since I ate. I should be good to lie down for a while now.”

The look on Ali’s face was worth any tiny feeling of smothering the blonde might have to endure. In all honesty, Ashlyn was the winner because her back really was bothering her. Plus, she always loved her wife’s hands on her. Always.

“That’s a great idea Ash” Ali turned in her arms and kissed her lips. “Thank you sweetheart.”

It was ninety minutes later and Ashlyn had been napping for just over an hour. Ali had unpacked their two suitcases, one small and one medium-sized, and was lying on one of the lounge chairs on the balcony enjoying the warm breeze and working on her tan. She was debating whether it was safe and private enough to take off her bikini top or not when she heard her wife’s panicked voice.

“Al, come here, quick!”

The brunette almost broke the chair and her ankle as she jumped up, heart racing, and lunged for the open sliding door. As she ran the last three steps into the main room she saw her wife still lying on her right side, facing her and the ocean view out the window. Her face was an odd mixture of terror and wonder.

“What’s the matter?! Are you ok?!” Ali stood at the foot of the huge bed and tried to see what the problem could be.

“I...I don’t know” Ashlyn answered honestly and looked up bashfully at her wife. “I think one of them just kicked me but I can’t tell. What does it feel like when they kick you?”

Ali’s heart steadied and she swallowed the lump of fear that had risen in her throat. She crawled onto the bed and lay down facing her keeper after kissing her on the forehead and taking a couple of deep breaths.

“Well, it feels like there’s a tiny foot inside you that’s kicking you” she shrugged. “I don’t really know what else to say.”

Ashlyn was watching her face intently as if all the answers she needed were going to appear there for her. She took Ali’s hand and placed it on her belly where she had felt the kick, keeping her hand on top of the brunette’s. They stayed like that for several minutes and Ali was about to suggest that it might have just been gas or a hiccup or one of the much more common things you feel when your entire digestive track gets smushed into a tiny fraction of the room it used to occupy, when she felt it.

“Oh my God” she whispered and grinned at her keeper who was looking back at her with wide-eyes and her own dimpled grin.

“That was a kick, right?”

“It sure was honey. Oh! And there’s another one” Ali giggled and slowly moved her hand around her wife’s stomach.

“My first kick” Ashlyn said dreamily and closed her eyes for a minute as she tried to process what she was feeling. “I wonder who that was?”

“It seems like it’s our girl, don’t you think?” Ali asked thoughtfully. “It felt like it was up here on
“Your left...”

“Yeah, totally” the keeper nodded. “I wonder when Dodge is going to join the party?”

“Be careful what you wish for” Ali cautioned with a small, knowing smile. “Kicking babies are not conducive to sleep. And if they get you in just the right spot you will definitely pee a little.”

“No way” Ashlyn looked aghast.

“Yes way” Ali giggled at her cute wife. “If you think you own a lot of bras now, you’re going to need to double the amount of underwear you own pretty soon babe. And I wouldn’t buy all the good ones either. Trust me, some of them you are not going to want to try and save.”

Ashlyn actually closed her eyes and shuddered at the thought which made her wife laugh her short, loud, shout of a laugh.

“But I love my underwear...” she whimpered sadly.

“And so do I” the brunette agreed and leaned over to kiss the pouty lips on her favorite face. “Why do you think I had all those old lady pee pads in my top drawer?” she giggled again.

“Oh yeah, I forgot about those. That’ll work too.” Her whole face visibly relaxed at the thought and she smiled back sweetly at the brunette. “Thanks” she looked down shyly and then back up.

“For what?” Ali tenderly caressed her cheek.

“For not making me feel like an idiot about all of this stuff.”

“Sweetheart, you’re going to feel like an idiot at least once a day from now on. Sometimes it’s the pregnancy brain kicking in and sometimes it’s just learning something new that you had no idea was even a possibility. But it’s all ok. You’re not supposed to know what you’re doing Ash. Your body’s never done this before so don’t feel bad about not knowing something. Ever.” She leaned forward and kissed her lips, leaving them there for a few seconds before pulling back again. “It’s hard to learn new stuff, especially when it’s for something really important like your first pregnancy. Please don’t beat yourself up, ok?”

“You make me feel like I can do anything Al” Ashlyn’s voice was full of emotion as she stared back into the cinnamon eyes she loved so much. “Thank you for always believing in me, even when I don’t yet myself.”

They spent one of the most relaxing weeks of their entire lives lounging on their balcony and at the beach and by the pool and in the tub, and in that big, beautiful bed. They went for a couple of walks a day, sometimes along the beach and sometimes into the busy downtown shopping district. They ate fabulous food, had sex almost every day and just were still. There was only one disagreement but it had been a serious one that Ashlyn knew was her fault almost immediately but it still had to play itself out for her to understand exactly why that was the case.

Dr. Comello had told the keeper in no uncertain terms that she needed to cut back on everything once her second trimester started. She wasn’t even allowed to use the recumbent bike anymore, just swimming, walking and stretching for exercise. Ashlyn was already almost at the end of her second trimester and she knew she had to be a little more careful because she was carrying twins. She remembered the doctor telling them both that twin pregnancies had some different rules.

“I think we should totally do this!” the keeper enthused as she handed her wife the brochure for the 3-hour, educational and historical jetski tour around the island.
“Ha ha, very funny” Ali made a silly face at her wife, who she assumed was just joking.

“What’s funny?” Ashlyn was confused and a little hurt that the brunette had just shut her idea down like that.

“Wait, don’t tell me you think it’s ok for you to get on a jetski, riding in the ocean, for three hours?” she asked incredulously.

“Yeah, I do” the blonde was getting annoyed again at her wife trying to baby her and smother her just because she was pregnant. “I’ll just be sitting there, it’s not a big deal...”

“I cannot believe you’re serious” Ali slammed the brochure down on top of the unoccupied concierge desk and stormed off toward the elevators.

Ashlyn let out a frustrated sigh and rubbed her face as her anger rose. She shook her head and started after her wife, moving not quite as fast because she was 6-months pregnant and carrying 18 extra pounds. By the time she rounded the corner to where the elevators were, she could see Ali step into one. The brunette turned around, with tears in her eyes, and saw Ashlyn and her angry visage three steps away from joining her in the elevator. They made eye contact and Ali reached forward, pushed the ‘close door’ button and then watched as they slid shut and the elevator started to rise.

“What the hell is the matter with you?!” Ashlyn yelled once she made it up to their room and realized Ali was in the bathroom with the door closed.

“Just go away” came the tearful reply from the other side of the bathroom door. “I don’t want to talk to you right now. Please.”

The anguish in the last word of her request almost broke the keeper’s heart. Ashlyn could not figure out why this was such a big deal no matter how hard she tried. But clearly it was.

“Al, honey, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. Can we please talk about this?” Ashlyn leaned her forehead against the door with a soft thud. “Please?”

Ali didn’t say anything for several minutes but the blonde could hear her crying and then sniffing.

“Ali please talk to me. I don’t understand what I did to upset you, but I really want to. I mean, I know you’re upset because I want us to do that jetski tour but...”

“Do you know what happens at 24 weeks?” Ali’s voice was small and sounded very far away when it finally slid underneath the bathroom door and up to Ashlyn’s ears.

“Umm, I’m one week closer to my 25-week appointment?” she asked, not entirely trying to be funny. “I don’t know. They start plotting against me, aiming at my bladder with their kicks? Come on, help me out baby, please?”

“It’s the threshold of viability” her voice was smaller and even farther away than it was a minute ago.

Oh fuck. Ashlyn closed her eyes and felt like an idiot. The threshold of viability that Dr. Comello had explained when she reviewed the milestones Ashlyn would be reaching for as her pregnancy progressed. With twins, or any multiple pregnancy, there was a high probability that the babies wouldn’t make it to full-term. That didn’t have to be as dire as it sounded, but sometimes it was. Twins were considered full-term if they made it to 38 weeks, milestone 5, rather than the 40 weeks for a singleton pregnancy. Every week earlier than 38 weeks carried a higher likelihood of deficiencies and disabilities and defects and problems with one and usually both of the babies. Both Ashlyn and Ali had been terrified after that appointment because Patty had used some frightening
words to describe each milestone. The first and, arguably, most important milestone that any twin pregnancy aimed for and celebrated was the threshold of viability at 24 weeks. That's the earliest the twins can be delivered and have any chance of survival. Twins born at 24 weeks usually spend three months or more in the NICU and only 1/3 of those babies will leave the NICU and survive without any long-term defects. If your twin baby has any chance at all, it has to make it in utero up through 24 weeks. Those are the cold, hard facts. At 28 weeks, milestone 2, the viability skyrockets and 90% can survive, but with a chance of complications like cerebral palsy and severe breathing and vision problems. At 32 to 34 weeks, milestone 3, you get excellent survival rates with the chance of some lung complications that will likely stay with them for life. At 37 weeks, milestone 4, the twins will have achieved full lung maturity and can be delivered without the risk of any serious problems.

And those were just the concerns for the babies. Women carrying twins were automatically at a higher risk for hypertension, anemia, placenta abruption, preeclampsia, and other serious conditions that could put her at great risk as well as the babies. Ashlyn knew all of this. She and her wife had both looked up all of the things Dr. Comello told them that day and then they told each other how scared they both were about every part of it. They promised each other that they would both do everything in their power to make sure those babies made it to 37 weeks, no matter what.

“Do you know what week you’re at right now?”

“23” Ashlyn’s voice was hoarse but loud compared to Ali’s. “I’m at 23 weeks and I’m an idiot and I’m so sorry honey. Fuck. I just wasn’t thinking. I was relaxed and on island time and just...not thinking.”

It was quiet as they both thought about the goddamned terrifying threshold of viability some more. Ashlyn instinctively put both hands on her belly to try and protect her babies there. She let her head gently thud against the bathroom door again.

“Ali, will you please open the door?” the desperation in the keeper’s voice was impossible to hide.

“It’s open.”

Jesus fucking Christ. Ashlyn hadn’t even bothered to try the door, she had just assumed it was locked. Another idiot move. When she stepped into the bathroom she saw her beautiful brunette curled up in the empty tub, fully clothed. She was almost in the fetal position except that she was leaning up against the back of the tub with the side of her head on the headrest. The big, two-person soaking tub made her look extra tiny and Ashlyn started to cry when she saw her.

“Sweetheart, I’m so sorry” she squeaked out as she stepped carefully into the tub making Ali’s eyes go wide at the maneuver. “I’m ok, I’m being careful” she assured as she gulped air between her tears.

Ashlyn positioned herself in front of Ali’s lap, which was still sideways, and curled up in her own fetal position with her head resting on her wife’s hip. Ali moved so she was flat and Ashlyn’s head was in her lap with her remorseful hazel eyes looking up at her. The brunette idly ran her hand through her keeper’s longer hair at the top of her head and wiped the tears off of her cheek with her free hand.

“I just wasn’t thinking Al...”

“Shhhh, it’s ok” the brunette soothed her upset wife. “It’s ok babe. You’re supposed to be relaxed and carefree, that’s why we’re here. Everything’s ok.”

“You’re not mad at me?” she whimpered as she started to get her hormone-fueled emotions back
under control.

“No, of course not. Not now that I know you weren’t just being cavalier about wanting to do that jetski tour. That pissed me off” she explained softly, not wanting to get Ashlyn worked up again.

“Then why are you in here like this?”

“I just needed a few minutes to myself to think, that’s all. And I knew you’d give me some privacy if I came in here.”

“Well, I wouldn’t have, except that I thought the door was locked” Ashlyn admitted shyly.

Ali smiled at her keeper and was relieved to see her return it, even though it wasn’t as big as it usually might be.

“I couldn’t lock the door on you babe. What if you had to pee?”

“See that, right there” Ashlyn took her wife’s hand and brought it to her lips so she could kiss it.

“Even when you’re mad at me you’re still trying to take care of me. God I love you Alexandra Krieger. And I love these babies so much and I haven’t forgotten our promises to each other. I will never do anything that puts them at risk. I swear to God...”

“I know honey, I know” Ali leaned over and kissed her wife’s lips softly. “But thank you for saying it again. And you’re doing an incredible job taking care of our babies. I’m so fucking proud of you Ashlyn. I love you.”
Graduation and Preparations

Whitney Elizabeth Flanagan graduated from Harvard Law School on Thursday, February 23rd, 2023 and Ashlyn and Ali threw her a big party that night at the Knight-Harris offices in Cambridge. Whitney’s parents and brother and sister-in-law had flown in for the ceremony that afternoon and were beaming with pride for the entire rest of the day. Many members of Ryan’s family made the trip up from Long Island and more than a few former teammates were in attendance too. Any Breakers teammate that was in the eastern half of the USA flew in to Boston for the party and celebrated their former captain in style. Bob Kraft sent his best regards and an insanely expensive bottle of champagne for the longest-tenured captain in the history of the Breakers along with a note instructing her not to wait too long to enjoy it. ‘We have a mutual friend who will remind you of the very same thing and she’s absolutely right!’ he had thoughtfully written. Hilary Knight and the Boston Pride were in town so she was able to be there with several of her teammates, including Kacey Bellamy and her new fiancé Carmelina Moscato. The UNC women’s soccer program was well-represented too. Tobin Heath, Allie Long, Megan Klingenberg, Heather O’Reilly and several other alumnae, including Whitney’s good friend and agent and vital K-H employee Jen Tucker, made their presence known almost immediately. Before anything official had even happened at the party the Tarheels shouted out their old fightsong at the top of their lungs with Whitney and Ashlyn gleefully joining in. The whole evening was yet another testament to how loved and admired and respected the new lawyer was in every facet of her life. For the first time in a long time, Whitney let the people who loved her praise her. She basked in it.

That was a busy week. Meg was visiting for her February vacation and Ashlyn and Ali had their 25-week appointment with Dr. Comello on Tuesday. They had their own private celebration about the excellent health report they had received for both babies and Ashlyn. They had reached the first milestone – the threshold of viability, and they were more determined than ever to hit the next one. Ashlyn took advantage of having Meg there that week so they could discuss the bedroom situation in the big old house.

“You’ve never really had your own room here kiddo and I know you’re ok with that” Ashlyn started one afternoon early in the week as they sat together up in Ali’s office on the third floor. The keeper had discussed the subject with Meg more than once over the years and the girl didn’t expect or need her own room in the house she only visited twice a year. “But we’re going to be making some changes” she patted her growing belly, “and I was thinking of making this room into your room, as long as you don’t mind if other people borrow it when they’re visiting and you’re not here.”

“Who’s going to be in the other bedrooms” the almost 11-year old raised her eyebrows. Her birthday was March 8th and every time she came up for her February vacation week Ashlyn and Ali celebrated her big day a few weeks early with her. “Besides yours, I mean.”

“Well Drew will stay in his room and we’re going to turn the other front bedroom into Josie’s room so we can use the nursery for the twins.” Ashlyn watched her face as she continued. “The guest bedroom across from the nursery will have to stay a guest room for a while because we’re going to need some help taking care of the new babies and Deb Deb, or my mom and Carol, will be staying in there. And they’ll need to be close to the bathroom because they’re old” she winked. “So when you come back in August I want to have this room ready for you. If you think that’s a good idea.”

“Really? That’d be cool” she nodded thoughtfully as the smile on her face grew bigger every minute.

“I don’t know, you’d be the only one up here on the third floor” Ashlyn spoke in a teasing voice but she was really trying to find out if this would spook the girl or not. “I mean, besides the dogs. I know
Fred would sleep up here with you, but maybe Persey too” she giggled. “And who knows” she shrugged her shoulders, “if enough people are here at the same time you might have Deb Deb sleeping on this pullout” she motioned to the couch they were sitting on, “which we’ll be moving into the studio.”

Meg looked around the room, turning her head every which way to take it all in. She hadn’t spent very much time in the space over the years but she had always liked it. It smelled like Ali and was always organized and neat. She also loved the story about how Ashlyn made the room for her and then asked her to move in to the big old house with her – Meg thought it was romantic.

“But what about Ali’s office?” the girl turned sad eyes back to the blonde sitting next to her on the couch. “You did all of this just for her...”

“Oh you’re such a sweetheart” Ashlyn wrapped a long arm around her and pulled her into a side hug, kissing the top of her head. “We’re going to move the office out to the loft in the garage. We finished the inside of that garage and made it weather-tight years ago for our business when we were just starting out. So all the wires and cables and hook-ups are still there and it’ll be an easy switch to make. I promise.”

“What about the shot glasses?”

“You like those, don’t you?” the keeper grinned as they both admired the long, narrow shelves on the interior wall of the room that were full of Ali’s shot glass collection. Everybody loved that feature in the room. It looked cool. But as Ali and Ashlyn kept having children and those children started being able to walk and climb on things and grab things, the shot glasses had become sort of a safety concern for the couple. “Well the shelves are definitely staying but I think we’re going to box those shot glasses up for a few years while the other kids are so little. Maybe we can find something non-breakable to put on them instead?”

“Yeah, ok” Meg shrugged. “What about the tv?”

“That has to go with the office” Ashlyn chuckled. “We use it for remote conferences and Skype calls for work and things like that. Sorry kiddo.”

Meg blushed and wrapped her arms around the keeper for a hug but pulled back when she remembered or felt the belly full of babies.

“Sorry” she apologized meekly.

“For what?” Ashlyn was confused.

“Did I hurt the babies?” she pointed at the six-month baby bump, not taking her eyes off of it.

“No way” the keeper answered convincingly. “They haven’t told me yet, but I’m pretty sure they like hugs too” she winked.

Meg giggled and gave Ashlyn the hug she had originally planned. They sat quietly for a few more minutes and the blonde gradually realized that the little girl was still looking at her and her belly.

“It’s kind of weird seeing me pregnant huh?” she asked casually as she rubbed her stomach. “It’s been a couple of days but it’s a big adjustment isn’t it Meggie?”

“Yeah” she blushed again and looked down.

“You probably thought it was always going to be Ali who had the babies huh?” Meg nodded and
looked up at the keeper as she spoke. “You know, it took me a little while to get used to it too. But I think it’s a cool way to remind everybody that looks can be deceiving and don’t always tell the whole story. Right?”

Meg nodded again with her eyebrows raised for emphasis.

“Are you going to feed them too?”

“Do you mean breastfeed? Like Ali did with Drew?” The little, red head bobbed again. “Yes I am, hopefully” she leaned forward and knocked her knuckles on the coffee table in front of them. “You never know what’s going to happen and some babies like to breastfeed and some don’t. Like with Josie, she needed special formula so Ali couldn’t breastfeed her and we both used bottles all the time.”

“How does it work with two babies though?” she tilted her head to the side and moved closer to the blonde, putting her hand on her belly next to Ashlyn’s, making the keeper smile.

“Honestly, I don’t know yet” she chuckled. “But I’m going to go to a class next month and learn how to breastfeed them at the same time” she raised her eyebrows to her hairline and got the same response from Meg. “I’m a little nervous about it but I’m sure we’ll figure it out.”

“Maybe you could do one at a time until you get good at it?” she offered helpfully. “And Ali can feed the other one a bottle and then you can switch...”

They spent the next ten minutes laughing and trying to come up with ways to feed two newborn babies at the same time. Ashlyn pulled up a link on her phone to some nursing pillows that were designed specifically to help breastfeed twins at the same time and they both tried to imagine how it might work. The conversation eventually turned back to the bedroom situation and Meg asked about how the bedrooms used to be when Ashlyn was little and would visit her Grandma Lilian for the summer. That turned into a talk about Grandma Lilian herself and the keeper re-told several of her favorite stories about the woman who saved her summers and probably a lot more.

“What’s the boy’s name again?” Meg asked, bringing the conversation back to the twins.

“Dodge. It’s a family name from Grandma Lilian’s side of the family” the blonde explained. “It was her last name before she married my Grandpa. Like, your mom’s last name was Doucette before she married Dev and took his last name. But ‘Burnham’ is a lot easier to spell than ‘Karmacharya’ isn’t it” she giggled and Meg joined her. “So we’re giving our boy baby the name ‘Dodge’ for his first name to kind of honor Grandma Lilian.”

They talked some more about the names of everybody in the family and where they had come from and how the ‘Krieger’ name replaced Ashlyn’s ‘Harris’ name. After several more minutes when the conversation was winding down and they had started to decide what they wanted to do next, the redhead spoke definitively.

“I think you should name your girl baby ‘Lilian’ after your Grandma too. You can call her ‘Lily’.”

The day after Whitney’s party Ashlyn was entertaining her UNC friends, some of the Breakers teammates that had flown in for the party, and Whitney, Ryan and both of their families at the big old house. It was just a casual get-together and nothing fancy, but it was a fun and relaxing day. Ali had to go in to the office for at least the morning but was going to try and leave right after lunch to help hostess the big group. Ashlyn didn’t have to lift a finger though. Everybody was more than happy entertaining and tending to both the kids and the dogs while they all hung out. As much as Whitney was the main attraction of the day, nobody could get over how beautiful Ashlyn looked in her
pregnancy. Between the party the night before and the gathering that day, dozens of selfies and videos flooded social media bringing pictures of the very obviously pregnant keeper to millions of her fans who hadn’t been let in on the secret yet. Towards the end of the day Ashlyn finally put her own picture out and made a joke about what happens to your body when you retire. She also included a line about how happy and grateful and excited she was to be pregnant.

At one point that day, Whitney, Ashlyn, Tobin, Cat Whitehill, Yael Averbuch and Heather O’Reilly were sitting together around the nook table at the back of the family room, laughing and reminiscing about their time together at UNC. Cat had been a senior and Heather a junior when Whitney, Ashlyn and Tobin had begun their freshman year. Yael was one year behind. Whitney glanced at her best friend across the nook table and quirked her eyebrow questioningly. Ashlyn shrugged her shoulders and smiled. After one more quick look around the vicinity, the keeper leaned forward and told some of the people she had been closest with at UNC about the plans she and Whitney had for starting their soccer academy up there in New England sometime in the very near future. They had all overheard the two besties discussing features about their dream academy during their time together in the locker room or on the team bus or at trainings.

“You’re really going to do it?!” Yael asked, excited at the prospect.

“That’s awesome” Heather grinned when she saw both Whitney and Ashlyn smile and nod their heads.

“So what’s the big secret about?” Tobin asked with a confused frown on her normally laid-back face.

“Yeah, what’s with the cloak and dagger...?”

“Ash didn’t want to hurt anybody’s feelings or make them feel left out” Whitney explained. “We’re just starting to put the plans together now, and it’s all preliminary still, but you guys were the first list we put together of dream coaches we would love to have at the academy.”

“No pressure!” Ashlyn said much too forcefully. “I mean, it’s a big commitment and we just wanted you guys to know that we’re going to do it and we’re going to be asking you once we have more specifics...”

“How would it work?” Cat asked.

“Ideally, it would be a summer camp so ten weeks or whatever works out with wherever we find a place to do it” Whitney replied. “And, depending on the number of campers, obviously, we’d need coaches each week.”

“It would be a one-week commitment” Ashlyn clarified, knowing what they were all wondering. “We’d make it kid-friendly so you could bring your kids with you if you want” she looked right at Cat who had left her coaching career in the NWSL behind to be at home more with her kids. “And that’s really as far as we’ve gotten with this part of it. But it seemed like a waste to have you all here at the same time and not get us together to talk about it.”

“Different ages? Different skill levels? Boys and girls?” Yael inquired.

“Again, depending on the demand, yes.” Whitney looked over her shoulder to make sure they were still speaking privately. “We would focus each week on a certain age group. Hopefully just girls but we’ll see if we get enough girls. If not, we’ll have to turn to the boys too.”

“What’s your timeframe for having this up and running?” Heather quirked an eyebrow at the keeper.
“Some of you are going to be quite busy for the foreseeable future” she chuckled, as did all the other women.

“No shit. You think?” Ashlyn grinned. “We’d like to get it planned out and funded this year and hopefully it will start the summer of 2024 or 2025 at the latest.” She leaned back against the banquette seat. “And now that we have one of the greatest legal minds in the land available to focus on it...”

Everyone laughed again and Whitney rolled her eyes.

“I think it’s awesome and I’d love to come coach a week” Heather offered. “Maybe even two depending on the scheduling.”

“Oh, um, did we forget to mention that it would be a volunteer position at first?” Ashlyn made an apologetic face. “Once it gets rolling and turning a profit, obviously you’d get paid.”

“I’m still in” Heather nodded and looked around the table at some of the best soccer players she had ever played with in her life. “What a group this is, eh?” she grinned.

“I’m in too” Cat said with her own grin. “I might be able to help you find a place up here that will work too.”

“If it works around my NWSL schedule then I’m definitely in” Yael agreed eagerly. “Can I tell you for sure once the schedule comes out for the 2024 season?”

“Oh of course” Whitney jumped in. “We assumed that would be a requirement for some of you” she looked at Tobin. “And we’ll be opening this request or position or volunteer opportunity to other players too, like Kling and Allie Long and Crystal Dunn and even some less-qualified non-tarheels as we get more specifics and make more progress with the academy in general. But for now, it’s just you guys. You’re our building blocks.”

Later on, Tobin joined Ashlyn on her brief daily walk around the block with the dogs. The keeper couldn’t go too hard or too far but she was strongly encouraged to keep up her daily walks even if they felt useless to the former professional athlete.

“The Academy huh” Tobin tossed out with a sly grin as they strolled along in the chilly afternoon. “I’m really proud of you Ash.”

Throughout their almost twenty-year friendship, Ashlyn had learned that this was just about the highest compliment you could earn from the soft-spoken and thoughtful midfielder. Her hormones made it extremely difficult not to burst into tears when she heard the words.

“Thanks Tobes” she finally squeaked out.

They strolled in a comfortable silence for a few more minutes before Tobin spoke again.

“You know I’ll help any way I can” she started, focusing her eyes on the caramel colored dog at the end of the leash in her hand. “Do you need investors?”

“Aw dude, I don’t want your money...”

“I know” Tobin interrupted her and turned to look at her friend as they walked. “But what if I want to give it to you anyway?”

Ashlyn was incredibly moved and finding it hard to speak, so she just kept quiet until she could start
to get a handle on her emotions. Tobin knew how proud her friend could be. She also knew how much Ashlyn hated to ask her friends for anything. It was almost a character flaw sometimes and all of her friends were aware of it.

“How about instead of money, since you won’t take that from me even though I think it’s a smart business investment and my financial advisor would easily sign off on it” she was quiet but not dumb, “how about if I do some promo for it and officially endorse it and all of that jazz?” she paused for a few steps. “Would it be ok if I did that?”

The keeper couldn’t do it. Her emotions were all over the place and she simply stopped and stood there for a minute. Tobin turned around and took the two steps back to her so she was grinning right in front of her old friend. Ashlyn smiled back at her through some tears that she just couldn’t hold in any longer and then gave her a big hug.

“I promise I won’t let you down Tobes” she finally managed to say.

“I know you won’t.”

March was a month of preparations. The couple had learned the hard way to be as prepared as possible as soon as possible because you just never knew what was going to happen. Drew had arrived late and the house had been completely stocked and ready for the new baby. Josie’s early entry into the world had found her parents and their house both unprepared. They weren’t going to let that happen again. Ashlyn’s official due date was June 3rd and that would be her 40th week of pregnancy. Everybody knew if she could get them to 37 or 38 weeks, which would be May 13th or May 20th, it would be considered a big win for both mother and babies. 37 weeks was milestone #4 for carrying twins – meaning their lungs had developed to full capacity and should be completely healthy. It was the ‘all-clear’ milestone that every mom of twins or multiples fought to carry their babies to.

God Bless Ken and Vicki Krieger. They were invaluable that Spring as Ali and Ashlyn went to a breastfeeding class that even included some specific sessions for nursing twins at the same time. It was a four-week course in the evenings and Ali was annoyed but then very happy when she realized the classes were much better than the ones she had taken before Drew was born. The brunette had read a lot about how challenging it could be to breastfeed twins and she wanted to be able to help her wife as much as possible.

“Is it ok if I go to the classes with you?” Ali asked her keeper carefully, after noticing that Ashlyn had sounded hesitant to tell her the schedule.

“Well, sure you can...are you sure you want to?” the blonde continued her tentative approach to the conversation.

They were up in the third-floor office packing everything up to be moved to the loft in the garage. Ashlyn was sitting on the couch and wrapping all of the shot glasses before packing them safely into two big boxes, destined for storage in the basement for the time being. Ali was working on boxing up everything else, except the electronics. Ken, Vicki, Koty and his girlfriend were coming that Saturday to help them move the furniture around inside the house and the couple had been working diligently and talking about their plans and schedules for the rest of the week.

“I definitely want to” Ali answered and started to watch her wife’s face to try and figure out why she was being so strange about this topic. “I don’t know anything about nursing twins, and I can’t imagine doing it at the same time” her honesty was easy to feel. “I’d really like to learn as much as I
can so I can be helpful once you start breastfeeding.”

Ashlyn nodded, distractedly, and continued her task without looking up. Ali gave her a few minutes before she broached the subject again.

“It’s ok if you don’t want me to go with you Ash” her voice was soft and she was trying hard to hide the hurt she was feeling. “I can go to a different class, I just thought it would be easier...”

“I feel awful because I didn’t go with you to your breastfeeding classes” the keeper finally admitted, still not lifting her head. “I...I’m really sorry honey.”

“Sweetheart” Ali frowned but then, in the next second, felt relieved that her wife didn’t really want to go by herself. “Your schedule was a lot more challenging to work around back then, remember? We had a hard enough time just getting to the birthing classes. I know you would have come with me if you could have.”

“I totally would have” Ashlyn replied quickly, finally looking up to find her wife gazing back at her adoringly.

“So, it’s really ok if I go with you?”

“Yes. Please. God, I’ll take all the help I can get” she revealed nervously and tried to cover it with a laugh.

“You’re going to do great Ash. I know you are.”

“I don’t know” she swallowed hard. “The only thing that scares me more than pushing these two babies out of my body is trying to feed them once they’re out.”

“Listen” Ali joined her on the couch, turning her body sideways and putting one reassuring hand on Ashlyn’s thigh and the other on her back. “It’s all scary. I won’t lie to you. But I know you can do it. And, worst case scenario, if they don’t take to the breast right away we’ll fill in with bottles until they get it figured out. You’ll teach them babe, I just know you will.”

“I’m glad you’re confident” she grinned bashfully at her kind wife.

“Hey, do you remember before we had Drew and I was so scared that I wouldn’t be able to do it?”

“Kind of, but you didn’t really seem scared. Not the way I remember it anyway.”

“I’ll never forget what you said to me. It made me feel so much better. We were in the tub together and I finally told you how terrified I was and you just looked at me and told me that you had no doubt in your mind that I could do it and you never had.”

“I did?”

“You did and it meant the world to me to hear you say those words Ash. And I’m saying them to you now. It has never once crossed my mind that you might not be able to deliver these babies. Not once. I know you can do it and that feeling just gets stronger and stronger every day.”

Ashlyn smiled softly and blinked at the brunette.

“Thanks sugarplum. That really does make me feel better.”

By the end of the month of March they had taken the big double bed from the front bedroom and moved it up into Meg’s new room, which was huge now that the plan table, big desk, filing cabinets,
plan storage boxes and TV were out in the garage loft. They decided to keep the pullout couch where it was, just in case they needed to put Chris, Beth and both their kids into one room at some point down the road. They bought a new pullout, with a much more relaxed and comfortable feel to it than the office-y one that Ali had selected for her office, and put it in the studio. That meant they had to say goodbye to Ali’s old couch from her little house in Stoneham. It made both women much sadder than they expected and they both fought back tears as they watched Ken and Koty carry it out to the first floor of the garage. It should probably just have been thrown away, it was so old and had seen a lot of use over the years – even in the studio. But Ashlyn wanted to donate it to the battered women’s shelter as she had done with the other pieces of furniture from her Grandma’s house eight years ago.

They moved Josie’s crib, the other twin bed from the nursery, and her changing table into the front bedroom and decorated it as nicely as they could without re-painting anything. They wanted to wait until after the twins had settled in for a few months to move their 21-month old into her first big girl bed and let her pick out the theme for her own room. Until then they were just hoping she wouldn’t notice that too much was different about her new room. The nursery remained the same as it had been all along, but with fresh coats of paint and a brand new crib to match the one Josie still used and a new changing table. All the parents of twins they had talked to or chatted with online had told them that they kept both twins, sideways, in the same crib for the first five or six months. Once they were able to roll themselves over they were separated and put into their own cribs. The plan, so far, was to try and keep the twins sleeping in the same room and on the same schedule for both eating and sleeping. That was the goal of every couple that had twins. But they had both read how difficult that was to actually achieve. Their plan B was to move one of the twin’s cribs into the Guest Room across the hall if they really felt like they needed to separate the babies at some point.

In addition to the new bedroom and furniture arrangement, they completed their breastfeeding classes, got their first ever minivan so they could drive around with all four of their children in one large, atrocious vehicle, and flown to Satellite Beach for three days to celebrate Tammye’s 60th birthday with her in March too. That short trip opened Ali’s eyes to just how much help they were going to need that summer once the twins arrived. Ashlyn was 7-months pregnant in March and the brunette tried to do everything for Drew and Josie on their flight down to Florida so Ashlyn could just rest. It had been insanely difficult and she wanted to cry by the time they all got into Beth’s car outside the airport. It was a wake-up call that Ali honestly didn’t think she would need. But she got the message and asked her mom that very same visit if she would come up and stay with them starting at the beginning of May.

The minivan didn’t really thrill either woman. They knew they were going to have to bite the bullet and get one but they had been putting it off. But it turned out to be one of the easiest tasks to complete in March. Ali contacted Subaru to switch out Ashlyn’s sports coupe for the minivan and they insisted that the growing family use both vehicles. Subaru was newer to the minivan market and had been playing catch-up to everybody else for years. They were planning to market the hell out of Ashlyn Harris, new mom of twins, and her new Subaru minivan. The keeper agreed, thinking it would be fun to film some moments each month with her babies in the minivan. She was relieved the new audience they were trying to reach might be happy to see her posts about her kids and family. Her younger fans weren’t always thrilled with all the toddler content the blonde put out on her social media accounts. And the concession Ashlyn made to her beautiful brunette in a show of true, undying love? The minivan was white. The blonde couldn’t stand white cars or vehicles because she had always associated them with old people driving them. Even if she was renting a car, she would make them give her anything other than white. Ali loved white cars and didn’t really have a reason for it. Her dream car when she was a younger woman was a white BMW x6 Sports Activity Coupe. She could never afford one and once she got to the point where she could, she had already made the practical, sensible decision to buy her truck. It wasn’t available in white, she definitely asked. So
Ashlyn Michelle Krieger agreed to buy not only a minivan, but a white one. What was the world coming to?

“So what do you think?” Ali took four steps into the office and turned to watch the new lawyer’s reaction.

“If you don’t like it we can re-do it” Ashlyn added in quickly and nervously as she hovered behind her best friend in the hallway.

Whitney walked into the office that Saturday morning and admired the new desk and credenza behind it with one of the fourteen foot side walls completely lined with glass fronted bookshelves. They were tall, leaving only enough room for trophies or framed certificates or other decorative items on top. They were also empty because the keeper wanted to make sure Whitney liked the office furniture she had selected for her before loading them up with the law books Knight-Harris had purchased for their intern and now in-house lawyer. Everything was done in a light, oak wood and a beautiful mixture of contemporary with enough traditional touches to make it work as a New England lawyer’s office.

“Isn’t this Hilary’s office though?” she stammered, not sure what else to say right away because she was so moved by the gesture her friends had made.

“It was hers” Ali explained. “But once the addition is finished next month she and Ash will get the two offices in there instead.”

“We hardly ever use them, especially Hil’ Ashlyn added. “Besides, we get executive bathrooms up here now where my office used to be. Win-win.”

“You guys” Whitney shook her head as she continued to take in all the details of the room. It was obvious how well her best friend knew her tastes. The new lawyer couldn’t have designed a better office herself. It was perfect. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Well you say you like it...or not” Ashlyn grabbed the back of her neck anxiously as she stood just behind her bestie. “The suspense is killing me.”

“Ash” Whitney’s face melted into a smile that grew into a huge grin as she turned and hugged the keeper. “I love it. There’s nothing I would change. It’s perfect. Thank you.”

The addition was a little less than half the size of the existing building, and it was going onto the back right corner of the building. The huge parking lot behind the building was being re-purposed so they could fit nine more offices for newer agents and, eventually, Whitney’s legal team to use. They were building it all four floors and even including the foundation down into the basement. Ali really didn’t believe in doing things twice and this addition had been on the back burner for a while, just waiting until the company had grown big enough to require it. There would be three offices in the addition on each floor from the basement up through the third floor. The basement offices would stay vacant until they needed them for more than just the security office. The fourth floor was unique in that it would only have two bigger offices for the two, name partners of the company.

“We know you’d probably rather be down on the second floor where the rest of your legal team will be but we weren’t going to move Sutapa up here so, sorry about the leg work you’ll be doing” Ali apologized sincerely.

“Fuck that” Ashlyn grinned. “She’s the boss, she can make them come up to see her.”
“Yes, but we both know that’s not Whitney’s style” Ali smiled warmly at Knight-Harris’ new Chief Counsel.

Whitney Flanagan, in true, Whitney fashion, had adjusted her courses over the last summer semester and then Fall semester at Harvard Law in anticipation of and preparation for her new position at K-H. Contrary to Ali’s original fear, she discovered that she loved Contract law. Not only did she love it, but she was really good at it. Her mind was fast and facile enough to understand the intricacies of it and she was one of those people who could look at a contract and see thirty different ways it could be massaged or tweaked to maximize the benefits for the client. Ryan had asked her if doing that and finding those loopholes didn’t make her feel like a sleazy, greedy attorney. Whitney never blinked when she told him that it made her feel like Robin Hood making sure the poor and underrepresented young women didn’t get taken advantage of just because they were so grateful to have a contract, any contract no matter how one-sided towards the team, put in front of her.

She also started appraising her fellow law students. She wanted to build her team of lawyers and paralegals and interns with the right people, right off the bat. She knew K-H wouldn’t be able to keep all of them for long periods of time, but she wanted to get good people for as long as possible. She brought in people that she knew would do a good job for whatever the particular need was at a specific time. If they were going to need three contract attorneys to get through the glut of contracts coming up from the NFL draft and WNBA draft that were both in April, then that’s what she focused on to start with. And that’s how she planned to build her team. It was exactly what Jared had done in the very early days when he would come to the big old house and work out of Ali’s third floor office. He knew somebody from school that would be a great fit for whatever they needed next and it worked every time. That was how both Marcy, Ali’s right-hand-woman, and Holly, the IT wiz, had come to K-H.

Ali’s whole business strategy was to hire the right people in these management positions and then let them do their thing. But that only worked if she knew them and trusted them implicitly. The other shareholders, Hilary, Jared, Ashlyn and Ali, were happy to finally have somebody in the fifth shareholder position and they were thrilled it was Whitney. Both Hilary and Jared had known and liked the lawyer for years. Ali often gave Whitney credit for things she brought to the shareholder meetings or for solutions she brought to whatever problem K-H had on any given day. They all knew Whitney was the real deal and they were excited to have her on board. Which was no small thing for the shareholders. That meant they all gave up shares of their own to give to Whitney to keep things fair. When Ali, Ashlyn and Hilary first made Jared a shareholder it wasn’t an equitable split. The three women who had founded the company together each held 26% of the shares and Jared held 22%. He knew it was a more than generous offer and it was a big part of the reason he had always worked so hard for the company he part-owned. Now that there were five shareholders the split of shares changed to Ali, Ashlyn and Hilary having 21% each with Jared and Whitney having 19% each. The slight difference only mattered financially. Each of the five shareholders got one vote when they were making decisions for the company and they were all equal votes.

“I appreciate being up here on the 4th floor. I get it” she nodded at Ali and Ashlyn. “I’ve got some really great people lined up for you to look at” Whitney said with excitement in her voice.

“Whit, listen, I meant what I said. That’s your department to staff and run” Ali gave her a serious look. “If you want my opinion on anybody or anything, of course, I’m always happy to chime in. But I trust you. We trust you” she glanced at Ashlyn and then back at Whitney. “My best advice right now, at the beginning of March, is to get some support staff hired before you’re drowning in NFL and WNBA contracts next month. I want to pull all of the contract work that we outsource, back in-house. If we can. I either need you to tell me we can’t or make sure we can. Ok?”

“Yes. Got it. We’ll be handling it in-house and I will be running things by you for a little while, just
to make sure I’m on the right track. And I am a fan of panel interviews. I think two or three different people pick up on different things in an interview...”

“I agree” Ali nodded. “Work through Sutapa to set those up. I think you’ll like her. She’ll reach out to any of us you request for any interviews and we’ll get them scheduled.”

“Wow” Ashlyn grinned so wide her dimple appeared. “I love it when Ali does that. Now you’re both going to be doing the kick-ass businesswoman, boss lady thing? This is fucking awesome” she fist-pumped and made both women laugh out loud.
Saturday April 15th was the Boston Breakers 2023 season home opener and it was sold out. Monday was the Boston Marathon so it was a long, holiday weekend and the weather was unseasonably warm. The place was packed. It was as if the Breakers had won the championship last year instead of finishing in fourth place. Ashlyn had been working for the Breakers since she retired as their outreach ambassador. It involved about one public appearance a week, give or take, and they were all blissfully local to the Greater Boston area and surrounding suburbs. Her schedule got quieter in the offseason with only one public appearance every three weeks or so. But she had been busy in the ramp up to the new season since mid-March when training camp had started up. The keeper would be attending the season opener as the Breakers guest of honor and honorary captain. It was nice, because for all of her leadership she had never once been the captain of the Breakers. Ashlyn wanted to bring her kids out with her to do the coin toss and the only way to make that happen would be if somebody went with her and the kids. Josie was getting bigger and was much better at walking at 22-months old. That was the problem, she could take off running whenever she wanted. And Drew was getting so big. He would turn 4 years old next month. Ali begrudgingly agreed to go down onto the pitch with her wife and their kids. She wasn’t a stick in the mud usually, but she was very cautious with stepping into the public light that her wife lived in. She was nervous about it for their kids too, but there was nothing she could do when her own wife was the one posting the cute pictures of them on her social media.

As much as she didn’t want to do it, Ali’s breath was almost knocked out of her when the crushing ovation from the fans hit all four of them as they stood in front of the team captains, Julie King from Boston and Kelley O’Hara from Sky Blue, and officials to do the opening coin toss. The brunette held Josie in her arms and kept her eye on Drew who had gone to give Julie a hug and gotten a big reaction from everybody in the stadium, players and coaches included. Ali felt her wife’s body tense up as she stood there with her arm low around the keeper’s waist. She patted her hip and moved her hand to rub her lower back, instinctively and without any thought about who was watching. The brunette’s only thought was to comfort Ashlyn as her hormone-fueled emotions started to take over. The blonde was moved by so many things – the crowd’s overpowering ovation, Drew’s adorable hug, all the smiling faces of her former teammates as they watched from their line-up, her wife’s warm, safe and strong hand on her back, holding her up physically and emotionally as she always seemed to do.

“Are you ok babe?” Ali leaned in and spoke loudly but Ashlyn could barely hear her over the din of the stadium. The brunette patted her hip to get her attention and asked the same question again.

“Yeah, I’m good. Thanks” she replied just as loudly with a smile that was a little bit sadder than Ali would have liked.

Ashlyn flipped the coin and the captain made her call but Drew bent down and picked up the coin before anybody else could see it. He was just trying to be helpful as he smiled and handed it up to his mother.
“Here mama!”

The crowd erupted in more awwws and a good deal of laughter too. Kelley O’Hara told Ashlyn it was the cutest thing she’d ever seen as they had the keeper flip the coin into the air again, this time with Julie King holding Drew’s shoulders in front of her, just in case. The game finally got underway after every Breakers player jogged past the Krieger family and high-fived all four of them, Ashlyn holding Josie’s little hand up in her own to help her. The fans still loved Ashlyn like Ali had never seen an athlete be loved before. She had never seen a player so beloved and she stopped trying to analyze it and simply enjoyed it. As they made their way back to the K-H suite, walking around the edge of the pitch, she heard a million different comments shouted Ashlyn’s direction, and some even to herself. She was praying that their children didn’t have to hear something horrible shouted out about their mama and was genuinely surprised when it didn’t happen. The brunette knew those people were in the crowd and were probably shouting at Ashlyn, but she couldn’t hear them. Ali legitimately only heard the well-wishes and the congratulations and the compliments about how beautiful her children were that had been shouted out to the former keeper. ‘we love you Ash’ ‘we miss you Ash’ ‘you look gorgeous Ash’ ‘Harris for president’ ‘cute kids Ash’ ‘looking good keep’... the list went on and on. When they were finally back in the privacy of their suite the blonde pulled Ali to the side for a quick moment as the kids ran to friends and family and juice and snacks.

“Thank you for doing that honey” Ashlyn whispered through her throat, thick from holding back tears and sobs for the past forty-minutes. “I know it’s not your favorite and I really appreciate...”

Ali interrupted her with a soft, meaningful kiss as she cupped her cheeks with both hands. Ashlyn was surprised and couldn’t act fast enough to do more than just rest her hands on her wife’s hips.

“I love you Ashlyn” the brunette spoke emotionally from only an inch in front of her keeper’s smiling face. “I’m so proud of you” she shook her head slowly. “What you have with those fans is truly amazing and I want to thank you for sharing that with us.”

Ali went with the keeper to her Breakers Ambassador events when she could and if she couldn’t then Jen Tucker or even one of the newbie agents accompanied her. Ashlyn never went to an event alone, no matter how small or sparsely attended. She was seven months pregnant in March and eight months pregnant in April and she wasn’t taking any chances, no matter how ridiculous it seemed. It just made Ali love her even more. The brunette didn’t have to nag her wife very much during her pregnancy because Ashlyn was trying to do everything humanly possible to make sure her twins had the best chance she could give them. All of the focus and preparation she normally put into her trainings and workouts for the soccer pitch had gone into taking care of her body and giving it what she needed as well as what the babies needed to thrive. April had been much different than March in terms of how she felt and what she could and couldn’t do. She had chuckled at the season opener when she and Ali were talking with Sarah and Erin during the second half. They were coming up on their second anniversary that June and Erin was four-months pregnant. They had just told the Kriegers their big news that afternoon at the game and Erin could not take her eyes off of Ashlyn and her huge belly.

The keeper was 33 weeks and carrying big, healthy twins. She had gained almost 40 pounds so far and she really didn’t know how women who weren’t in good shape could possibly pull this off. For the first time she was genuinely uncomfortable no matter what she did, except for floating in a pool, or the soaking tub as long as it was only she and her belly in it. She kept threatening to try sleeping in there but Ali had so far been able to talk her out of it. Ashlyn was suffering through all of the late stages of pregnancy symptoms and not handling some of them well at all. Her favorite sleeping position was on her back, with Ali tucked into her left side. Well she hadn’t been able to sleep on her back since the middle of December and it aggravated her more and more all the time. There were important blood vessels that could be damaged if you slept on your back once you were in your
fourth month of pregnancy. It was just one of the rules.

Ashlyn’s hands and feet were all swollen. She had to wear her wedding rings around her neck on a chain after about month six. She had heartburn, constipation, and found it difficult to breathe sometimes depending on how hard their baby girl was pressing up against her lungs. She had a varicose vein on the back of her right leg, which was mostly camouflaged by her tattoos there, and hemorrhoids that hurt more than she could possibly have imagined. Even after watching Ali suffer through them as well. Her back hurt no matter what time of day it was. When the time changed it just meant a different part of her back was sore. She peed a little bit every time she sneezed or laughed or coughed and she tooted when she bent over half the time. It was great having Drew around and even sometimes Josie because if Ashlyn dropped anything one of them would almost always pick it up and bring it to her. Just as Drew had done with the coin at the Breakers game. Her breasts were swollen and painful and her nipples were so sensitive that Ali had to find her a supportive bra that had thick enough cups so that she couldn’t feel every painful movement of her shirt across her nipples all day long. Ashlyn napped several times a day because she had such a difficult time sleeping at night. She could barely get out of bed on her own by the end of April. Ali almost always woke up with her and walked around to her side of the bed to help her to her feet and into the bathroom. She wished she could do more but she knew there was only so much another person could ever do. The brunette tried to stay a few steps ahead of the symptoms so there was usually a simple solution already in the house for whatever the problem was. Like the wedding rings. Ashlyn had been devastated when she realized she would have to stop wearing them or run the risk of having to have them cut off of her impossibly fat fingers in another month or so. But Ali had been ready. She had already bought a white gold chain, to match the rings, that she knew her wife would like and all she had to do when her keeper melted down about her rings was go upstairs and bring the solution down for her. She did the same thing with some shoes and some bras and other clothing items that she knew had worked for her or Sydney or Molly or Beth in the past. When Ashlyn’s feet were too big to fit into most of her shoes and when she was so big that she couldn’t bend over to tie her shoes or buckle her shoes, Ali pulled a couple of pairs of slides out of her closet that her keeper could step easily into while still offering her the support her feet needed as they lugged around 40 extra pounds all day, every day.

But as uncomfortable as she was, Ashlyn never lost sight of the reason why. Knowing that she had two big, healthy babies growing inside her body didn’t make her feel better, but it made it all worthwhile. Ali could tell when one of those moments happened because Ashlyn’s face would go from whatever contorted grimace it was in to a serene smile for a few minutes. It happened once every hour or so and it made the brunette so proud of her strong, brave wife. The keeper’s sex drive was on another level, just as Ali’s had been. They were both sure it was going to be twice as strong as the Brunette’s had been because she was drowning in twice as many hormones, but it wasn’t twice as strong. Ashlyn was so big and uncomfortable that having sex was not easy to begin with. Then, once they managed to get her in a position that felt good for a few minutes, she would have to pee. And her breasts were so big and full that she leaked colostrum more often than not which she found sticky and annoying. It wasn’t like Ali could even try and lick it up quickly for her either because she couldn’t get near her breasts in their big, supportive, thick bras. As had been the case with both of Ali’s pregnancies, the only position that worked at all for sex once she got so big was lying on her side. The brunette used the big old reading pillow as best she could to prop her wife’s top knee up so she could get her mouth or her fingers near her center. There was no skinny dildo for this pregnant lady. Ali usually started with just one finger and sometimes never even added the second one. It felt like there was no room inside Ashlyn for anything else, not even one more finger.

For most of the second trimester the sex had been amazing and fun and hot because the keeper wasn’t that big yet, just extra horny. During that time Ali was constantly being groped and squeezed
and caressed whether she was awake or asleep or somewhere in between. She had gotten so much better over the years about being woken up, but it was still probably her worst moment of any day. Her college friends and roommates used to ro-sham-bo to see who would be unlucky enough to have to wake her up from a nap to go to dinner or training or class. But after she became a mother all of that changed, out of necessity. The maternal instinct kicked in and she became capable of waking up from a dead sleep and determining what course of action needed to be taken to help whichever of her children required it. It was a very good thing that she had almost four years of experience being woken up at all hours for any manner of need because that’s what Ashlyn did during her second trimester.

They had a lot of sex and both enjoyed it tremendously. But as soon as month seven was a couple of weeks in, Ashlyn’s interest in sex was tamped down by everything else her body was loudly telling her about. Sometimes Ali just gave her wife an orgasm, helped her to the bathroom and then they both went right back to sleep for the three hours until Ashlyn woke up to try and find a position that didn’t hurt two different things on her body. Sometimes Ashlyn insisted on getting her beautiful brunette off. The fact was that she still loved watching her wife come almost as much as she enjoyed her own climax. The problem was positioning. Their most popular position during the later months was the side by side 69. Ali had come up with a solution where Ashlyn lay on her side at the very head of the bed, where the pillows usually were, with her back to the headboard. Ali would lie opposite her but with her head at Ashlyn’s hips and vice versa. 69. Every time they tried this Ali’s top leg would drop down halfway through and usually land on Ashlyn’s head or, worse, her boobs. Neither of them knew why it was such a problem all of a sudden but they were sure it had something to do with the brunette’s long history of not being able to control her legs when she got too excited or had an orgasm. Ali thought her wife just wasn’t able to hold her leg up as much as she used to, but she would never say it out loud. The brunette’s fix was to tie her top leg, at the ankle, to the top of the headboard with one of their satin restraints. She got a little bit of a welt, depending on how long it took the keeper to get business done, but her leg never came crashing down again or shooting out in ecstasy, and into Ashlyn’s sore breasts, when she reached her climax either. But the keeper was, again, hampered by immobility and exhaustion and far more often than not Ali had to help with her own orgasm. Neither of them had ever had a problem with that in the past, but when it happened every single time it started to weigh on the blonde’s mind.

“It’s ok babe, that felt amazing” Ali purred into her wife’s neck one night as she moved around her belly and tried to get close without touching anything on the blonde that hurt.

“No it fucking sucks” Ashlyn panted out, winded from her exertion. “I can’t believe I can’t even get you off anymore without you helping!” she yelled in frustration.

“Since when has that mattered?” the brunette’s voice was low and calm but still a little breathy as her heart-rate slowed back to normal.

“Oh don’t tell me it doesn’t matter Al” she shook her head and closed her eyes, annoyed at herself. “It fucking matters.”

“Hey, preggo” she giggled, “listen to me now because this is important.” Ali got up on her elbow and grabbed her wife’s face to get and hold her attention, only speaking again once her favorite hazel eyes were staring back at her. “I’m telling you it doesn’t matter to me” she smiled sweetly. “So whatever judge or jury you’re trying to impress, just save it. It. Doesn’t. Matter. To. Me” she playfully squeezed Ashlyn’s cheeks with her fingers and thumb each time she said a word. “Got it?”

Ashlyn closed her eyes and was quiet for a minute and then Ali was horrified to see tears streaming down her wife’s face. She quickly pulled her hand away and started brushing them off the cheek she could get to.
“Oh honey, I’m sorry. Did I hurt you? I’m so sorry sweetheart. It’s ok...” Ali soothed and tried not to add more stress to the situation.

“You didn’t hurt me” she sniffled out after another long couple of minutes of tears which Ali tenderly kissed away.

“Are you sure Ash?”

“Mmmmm Hmmmm” she whimpered in reply and nodded her head. “God” she sniffled again. “Sometimes I feel like I’m going crazy. Like, really, truly, losing my mind.”

“Aww baby. It’s ok. You’ve got a lot going on...everywhere. It’s ok to feel like that now. But you’re doing such a good job. Those babies are so big and healthy and that’s all because of you.”

“Yeah?” Ashlyn’s voice was small and unsure.

“I promise you Ash, you are doing fucking awesome. I’m not even just saying it to make you feel better. It’s the truth honey. What does Patty tell you at every appointment?”

“That we’re doing good...”

“She says you’re doing great. And it has nothing to do with me or even the babies. It’s all you sweetheart. This great, uncomfortable, but successful pregnancy is 1000% due to you crushing every single part of it.”

“Yeah?” she lifted her frustrated face to search Ali’s smiling one.

“I promise you Ashlyn.”

It was in this compromising, sideways 69 position, with Ali’s left ankle tied to the top of the headboard, her back to the room and her mouth eagerly licking and sucking at her pregnant wife’s pussy, that they found themselves in during the middle of the night in the third week of April. Ashlyn had woken up around 1am to pee and Ali had gotten up to help her out of bed and then gone right back to sleep. As the keeper shuffled across the floor towards their bed she could see her wife’s beautiful body lying on her side and facing away, towards the fireplace wall of the room. She hadn’t bothered much with the bedsheet when she had gotten back into bed and it was just covering her legs and half of her butt. Ashlyn was now just as much of a furnace at night as her wife had always been so they usually slept with only a sheet on top of them. Ali had her sleep tank and thin, cotton pajama pants on but there was a swath of exposed skin at her lower back that had caught the keeper’s tired eye. Ashlyn looked from the skin at her lower back up to her sexy, exposed shoulder and arm and then over to the messy, brunette locks splashed across the pillow behind her head. She watched the steady rise and fall of her torso as she slept and suddenly Ashlyn’s core was on fire. That’s all it took those days, a lingering touch or a simple stolen glance at soft, smooth skin could set her off as if someone had just thrown a switch.

What Ashlyn really wanted to do was take her beautiful brunette from behind, driving her to an amazing orgasm with her favorite strap-on toy and then ride her magnificent ass herself. Unfortunately, none of that was going to happen. She didn’t have the strength or stamina for the first part and the thought of pounding into her wife made her cringe as she clutched her large, aching breasts and held them close together as she got back into bed. She thought about just masturbating but remembered Ali entreating her to at least see if she was up for it first. The brunette had promised that she would say no if she really didn’t feel like having sex. Buoyed by the possibility, the keeper rolled over and pressed warm kisses into Ali’s bare skin at her shoulder and between her shoulder blades, moving her long, soft hair out of the way and moaning a little bit. She
took some time, but not too much because it was late and she was tired. She reached down and rubbed her hand over Ali’s hip and ass and down the back of her strong thigh, still hidden underneath her thin pajama pants. She moved her hand around to the front of Ali’s thigh and dragged her fingers, firmly, up towards her hip and then across her stomach to her other hip and up towards her breasts. The brunette’s skin was room temperature and felt so soft that Ashlyn moaned again and pressed more kisses down her wife’s exposed arm. When Ali felt her keeper’s hand on her breast, underneath her fairly tight sleep tank, she smiled in her sleep and leaned back towards the middle of the bed and her horny wife. Ali started to drift towards consciousness as Ashlyn kissed across her shoulder and collar bone towards her neck and throat, still working one breast and then the other with her hand. The brunette turned her head towards the blonde as she opened her eyes, fully awake now. Ashlyn met her lips with a hungry kiss and squeezed her nipple, making them both moan into the liplock.

“Are you awake baby?” Ashlyn’s voice was husky with sleep and desire.

“I am now” she purred back sleepily and licked her wife’s lips, making her whine just a little at the surprising touch. “What do you want babe? Tell me what you need.”

It was a wasted question, but Ashlyn appreciated the effort, especially since she had just woken her up in the middle of the night.

“I need to taste you, and fuck you, and feel you come all over my hands and in my mouth...” the keeper drawled out as she started to toss the pillows to the foot of the bed and kick the sheet down there as well.

They kissed for a few more minutes while Ashlyn brought Ali’s nipples to stiff points that she could see easily through her sleep tank. She pulled her hand out from underneath the shirt so she could take her own, huge sleep shorts off. As soon as Ali felt her wife sit up she did the same, stripping quickly and wordlessly and then grabbing the one restraint that she had begun keeping in her nightstand drawer just for this reason. She tossed the two pillows on her side of the bed down with the others and helped Ashlyn slide up into place. Ashlyn was talking dirty and running her hands all over Ali’s body, pinching those nipples again and making the brunette whimper in anticipation.

“Are you good?” she asked, breathlessly, after spending a few minutes kissing and rubbing Ashlyn’s left leg that was in the top position as she lay on her right side with her back up against the headboard.

“No, but I will be very soon” she teased, her voice still dark and low. “Do you need help with that...”

And that’s why Ali loved her so much. As if Ashlyn could help her tie the restraint to the top of the headboard and slip her foot into it. The poor thing could barely move her own self where she needed to be. But she always offered, thoughtful and chivalrous no matter what.

“No, I’ve got it” she grunted a little as she lay back down after slipping her left foot through the loop in the restraint and letting her left leg hang. She pulled herself as close as possible to her sexy keeper and held her breath when she felt Ashlyn rest her head on her bottom thigh and bring her lips to her center. “Fuck, Ash...yes...”

They spent fifteen minutes eating each other out and groaning their love for each other as they climbed steadily toward their releases. Ali held her wife’s top leg up on top of her own shoulder as she pumped the middle finger of her right hand in and out of Ashlyn’s pulsing center and sucked hard on her clit.

“Unnnhhhh, Jesus...fuck...” Ashlyn cried out, pulling her tongue out of her wife’s delicious pussy
and sliding two of her fingers in instead. “Oh God I’m close Al” she gasped out and then bit down hard on the inside of Ali’s thigh while she rubbed her clit fast with her other hand.

“Oh my God...yes! yes!! Yessssssssss!” the brunette shouted as she came.

Ali managed to rub her keeper’s aching clit as the orgasm rocked through her body. The unsteady pressure was barely enough, but between it and the brunette’s sexy gyrations as she shook in her orgasm, Ashlyn reached her own release and came hard too.

“Fuuuuuckkkkk...” she groaned out and held tightly to Ali’s hips and ass as they both jerked and convulsed in pleasure.

“Mommy? I don’t feel good” Drew’s sad little voice rang out from just inside the door to the second-floor hallway. A screaming fire alarm couldn’t have sounded any louder to them than their son’s voice did in that instant.

“Oh my God!”
“Holy Shit!”

They had about ten seconds before their 4-year old son came into sight at the foot of the bed and was scarred for life. Ali was literally tied to the bed and there was no way Ashlyn could move that quickly. But she was going to have to try. Ali reached behind her desperately trying to reach the sheet. She straightened her body out, crawling and clawing, so her head was at the foot of the bed, on Ashlyn’s side, and yanked the sheet up and over to her wife who was hurrying on her hands and knees to the foot of the bed, right down the middle, hoping to get there before Drew did.

“Here” Ali urged in a whisper. “Take it” she grunted out as she pulled it up from underneath the mattress where it had been tucked in. “Wait there a minute sweet boy” she called out to her son in a terrified, strangled voice. “Mama’s coming.”

The keeper summoned all her strength and somehow got off the foot of the bed, wrapped the sheet around herself and turned towards the narrower entry way to the room just as Drew stepped into view. He was in the middle of a yawn and rubbing one of his eyes and his face was redder and sweeter than usual. Ali was lying very still and hoping to stay out of sight while her wife walked the boy back towards the bedroom door. She prayed that he wasn’t awake enough to see her ankle still tied to the headboard.

“What’s the matter buddy?” Ashlyn asked, breathlessly, as she turned him around and gently walked him a couple of steps toward the hallway, feeling his forehead with her other hand.

“My thwoat’s hurts” he whined pathetically and offered no resistance to his mother’s steering.

“Honey,” the blonde spoke over her shoulder to her wife, “he doesn’t have a fever but his throat’s sore...”

“Alright, let’s start with some water first ok sweet boy?” Ali soothed as she came around the corner in her robe, holding the bottle of water from Ashlyn’s nightstand out for their son.

It had only taken her a few seconds to free her foot, grab the water and then her robe off the back of the bathroom door. It was incredible what adrenaline could do for you. She patted Ashlyn gently on her sheet covered butt and kept her hand in the small of her back for a few seconds, glancing quickly at her flushed face and pained expression. She didn’t have the heart to chastise her for not locking the bedroom doors, at least the one that Drew could get to, before waking her up for sex. Ali could tell her keeper was just as horrified by what had just happened as she was, although the blonde hadn’t
been the one with her leg tied to the headboard.

“Do you have to pee?” she asked her wife softly.

“Nuh-uh” Drew replied at the same time that Ashlyn also spoke.

“Oh yeah.”

“Go ahead babe” the brunette kissed her wife’s cheek and then knelt in front of Drew. “I’ve got this.”

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The Dwyers and Kriegers brought their children up to Ken and Vicki’s house in Ipswich for Easter at the beginning of April, the week before the home opener and the Marathon. Whitney and Ryan joined them too and even the Kimballs attended this year, including Jared. Koty and his girlfriend were there but Tanner had stayed at school, trying to prolong his time at Providence College down in Rhode Island. He was a senior already and would be graduating at the end of next month. That had happened fast. It felt like Ali blinked her eyes and he had gone from a confused, struggling freshman to a confident, talented, widely-scouted and sought-after team captain and senior.

“So what’s he going to do?” Ashlyn asked Ken as they sat on the deck and watched Whitney, Ryan, Dom and Ali hide one hundred plastic Easter eggs around the front and back yard of the house.

“I’m not sure yet” Ken replied and looked up when he heard the sliding door to the house open behind him. Koty walked out with Josie in his arms.

“Hey! No cheating now” the keeper warned in a medium-serious voice and looked at her daughter’s grinning face. “No kid of mine is going to be a cheater.”

Ken got up and moved a chair over to join theirs but had it facing them and the house instead of the yard.

“Thanks Ken” Koty smiled and sat down, making sure his little niece didn’t turn around to look. “It’s nice and quiet out here” he exhaled with a chuckle.

“Yeah, they get pretty excited in there” Ken agreed with his own laugh.

“We’re talking about Tanner” Ashlyn filled the newcomer in. “What do you think he’s going to do?”

“He’s had some offers from a few clubs to go train with their B teams for the rest of the season, before the draft in January” Koty offered as he straightened out Josie’s pretty Easter dress with one hand as she sat on his lap.

“Which clubs?” the blonde inquired eagerly.

“DC United, Minnesota United, Colorado Rapids, Real Salt Lake and the Revs, so far anyway.”

“Makes sense, those are the five teams with the fewest points in the table right now” Ken nodded thoughtfully.

“Geez, I wouldn’t go to DC if I didn’t have to” Ashlyn spoke up and made a distasteful face. “It’s been a while since I’ve been down there, but when I played in Washington everybody knew the United owners weren’t really paying much attention to the team.”

“I think it’s better there now, but not much” Koty added. “I think he’s leaning towards Colorado or
Minnesota for a change of scenery.”

“I can’t say enough good things about the Revs organization” the keeper said, to nobody’s surprise. “Great ownership, fantastic new stadium, the best training staff...”

“I’d like to see him spend the rest of the season here with the Revs too” Koty smiled. “That way I can still make his games.”

Koty had been doing very well for himself since graduating from Tufts University back in January of last year. He completed his undergraduate degree and got a job as a structural engineer with a very well-respected firm in Arlington, MA. Ali knew it well both from walking past it every day when she lived in Arlington and also working with them occasionally once she started selling windows and doors. He had found a nice apartment near the Tufts campus in Medford, but far enough away to be in a relatively quiet neighborhood. It had to be close enough to campus though because his girlfriend of two and a half years was still a senior. Brianna was a nursing student and she would be graduating next month, just like Tanner. She was a nice, smart, capable young woman and everybody was relieved that she and Koty had found each other. They had taken their time and built up their friendship into a relationship and then finally moved in together when Koty got the new apartment after his own graduation last January.

Tanner had dedicated himself to soccer and had dated sporadically throughout college. Nobody special and nothing long-term but he had a tight-knit group of best friends and teammates that he always seemed to be spending time with on and off the pitch. Several of them had joined the Kriegers for any number of holidays and celebrations over the four years Tanner spent at Providence College. His dedication had transformed him into a talented, technical, midfielder who had the uncanny ability to see the game a little bit faster than most of the other players on the field. Whether or not that would translate to the MLS or not was the big question. The knock on Tanner Wild was that he was small. He had been forced to be crafty and creative because he had never been able to outjump or outmuscle anybody to or off of the ball. He was an incredibly hard worker and a very disciplined player and Ken Krieger, and Ashlyn Harris, knew he would make a very good professional player. He would probably never make the all-star team and almost certainly never get called up to the national team, but he could have a long and successful professional career if he went to the right place. He would make a great defensive or holding midfielder, distributing the ball up the field and shielding the backline from danger.

“Well that makes two of us” Ken agreed and made a goofy face at his adorable granddaughter. “Will you tell Uncle Tanner to stay here this summer so we can watch him play, please?”

“The third milestone you guys” Dr. Comello grinned at Ashlyn and Ali as she entered the examination room for their week 34 appointment the last week of April. “Everything going well?”

“Aside from the fact that I’m uncomfortable for about twenty hours a day, yes,” Ashlyn looked at her wife and winked, “I’d say everything’s going well.”

They went down the list of all of her symptoms and Patty reviewed all of Ashlyn’s test results and finished the exam with a string of her own questions.

“And how are the birthing classes going?”

“Good” Ali chimed in cheerfully. “Just one more to go next week and we’ll be all ready.”

“Speak for yourself” the keeper teased.
“No, I know” she smiled at her beautiful wife. “I remember the feeling well. I just mean we’ve done the breastfeeding classes and the birthing classes. We’ve got the house ready for the babies and we’ve moved Josie into her new room, hopefully, early enough so that she won’t feel like her new brother and sister kicked her out of the nursery.”

“The nursery is all twinned out” Ashlyn offered. “And, best of all, we’ve got a sweet, new minivan” she said as cheerily as possible before laughing out loud. “God, I never in a million years thought I would say that sentence.”

“Oh, too cool for minivans are we?” Patty quirked an eyebrow at her patient. “They’re insanely practical and once you’ve actually driven your children someplace in one you’ll understand why they’re pretty much a necessity.”

They looked at the ultrasound and saw the two babies in their usual locations, but Dodge had turned himself upside down, so his feet were down near Ashlyn's cervix instead of his head, in the two weeks since the last appointment.

“Is that a problem?” Ali asked, careful not to sound as alarmed as she really felt.

“Well, if he stays like that it means we can’t have the vaginal birth you want” the doctor looked at her patient seriously. “I’m sorry Ashlyn.”

“But what if he doesn’t stay like that?” the blonde asked, holding Dr. Comello’s gaze.

“I’m not sure how he managed to get himself turned around as it is” Patty chuckled softly and turned to look at the monitor again. “Once their room starts to get limited they don’t make big moves like that, usually. And now that he’s bigger than when he first got into this position...”

“He doesn’t have room to turn around again” Ali finished for her and squeezed her wife’s hand as they all looked at the monitor.

“That’s right” the doctor nodded and they were all quiet for a moment. “If he stays breach like this, upside down, then we’ll need to schedule a c-section delivery when the time comes. But you never know. Let’s see how he looks next week. He might surprise us yet.”

“But it’s not very likely, is it?” Ashlyn asked as she felt her wife squeeze her hand again.

“No. It’s not” Patty paused. She knew this was upsetting news for the first-time pregnant woman. “But the good news is that he’s growing and thriving and doing really well. They both are.”
Bedrest and Babies

But Dodge didn’t turn around the following week. He was still in a breach position with his feet down near Ashlyn’s cervix where his head was supposed to be. Both babies had grown and there was no way he would be switching positions any more. Dr. Comello was worried about the keeper’s blood pressure too. For the first time in 35 weeks her body was starting to register some of the serious effects of growing two babies.

“Please don’t put me on bedrest doc” Ashlyn pleaded. “I’ll behave, I promise. But if you say the words ‘bed’ and ‘rest’ she” she looked at her wife standing next to her, “will make it impossible for me to even get up and pee. I guarantee it.”

“I won’t say bedrest then” Patty smiled at them both. “But Ashlyn, I’m serious now, if your blood pressure doesn’t come back down by next week I’m putting you on bedrest.”

Ashlyn was annoyed, frustrated and a little concerned as they left the doctor’s office another week later. Week 36 had not shown any improvement in her blood pressure. In fact, it had gone up a little bit. Dr. Comello warned them both that if the keeper’s blood pressure was the same at her next, 37-week appointment that she was going to schedule the c-section for a day or two after that appointment. It would be irresponsible to take any chances. 37 weeks was the 4th milestone, when the babies had achieved full lung capacity. There was no reason not to take them a couple of weeks early. They were happy and healthy and if Ashlyn’s blood pressure continued to rise their health, as well as the keeper’s, would be compromised.

“It’s nothing to get all worked up over” she explained calmly when she saw both women’s faces go a little pale. “This happens quite frequently with multiples, I promise. I’m telling you this now so you can be prepared for it in case it happens next week. If you stay on bedrest this week you should be fine next week, regardless of what happens.”

Debbie and Mike Christopher had made their decision about buying the condo up in Manchester, MA and they were both pleased with it. They were going to be renting again this summer because they hadn’t selected exactly which condo they wanted to purchase yet. But after this summer they would become official condo owners in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. They wanted to take their time and make sure they chose wisely. The Grandma knew she would be spending more and more time in Gloucester as the kids got older. She envisioned spending the holidays there in addition to birthdays and summers. When the kids were in school and participating in sports and music and other extra-curricular activities she wanted to be there for opening nights and playoff games and science fairs. Mike knew it too. He could see the writing on the wall. And even if he hadn’t, Deb made sure to talk with him about it. The truth of their situation was that he didn’t really care where they lived as long as they could be together more often than not. He wanted his wife to be happy and he knew what that meant. They both thought it was smart to keep two homes, as long as they could afford it – which they could as long as they weren’t extravagant. They both loved living in Miami and had a lot of really great friends there. For the time being they were going to keep their big house there, mostly because they didn’t want to rush into anything and make a bad decision. They knew they probably wouldn’t be able to keep it forever, but for now it was what made them both feel safe and comfortable.

The condo they rented this summer was bigger and a bit more spacious. They loved the location last year but they felt like rats in a cage because it was just too small. They were renting one condo this summer for the month of July and a different one, in the same community, for the month of August.
Deb knew she was going to be hands-on at the big old house in May and June so she told Mike not to bother coming up until July if he didn’t want to. This summer wasn’t going to be a normal summer for anybody in the Krieger family and the Christophers knew it.

Deb arrived the first week of May, just as her daughter had requested, and moved into the guest room across the hall from the nursery. Both Drew and Josie were happy to have their Grandma with them again and got over their temporary shyness within a day, (Drew), or two, (Josie). Ali was working as long as she could until the big day. Knight-Harris was busy processing and negotiating contracts for all of their clients who had just been drafted into the NFL and WNBA in April. And the next wave was coming with the MLB, NHL and NWHL drafts all happening in June. The contracts weren’t just for draftees. There were hundreds of free agents moving around during the offseason and they all needed representation too. The brunette had been taking the kids into daycare on her way to work in the morning and picking them up in the mid to late afternoon on her way home. Once Deb got there, she and Ashlyn kept the kids home with them for that first week and had a nice time together. Drew was turning four later that month and was starting to not need his afternoon nap anymore. It had already been cut down to one hour or less and the daycare told Ali that he would read or look at books on his own while the other kids napped if he wasn’t tired. Josie was turning two next month and she was now on Drew’s old schedule of the one big afternoon nap a day. She had adjusted to her new bedroom like a champ, much to her mothers’ relief. All the books and advice sites warned about making any big adjustments to the older kids’ schedules or daily routines when you brought a newborn into their lives. If they had a negative reaction to any of the changes they might, and often did, associate it with their new brother or sister. Drew transitioned into his big boy shark bed when he moved into his new room before Josie was born and it had worked beautifully. But Josie was physically smaller than he had been and they just didn’t think she was ready for a big girl bed yet. So they kept her in the same crib she’d been sleeping in all her life and moved it into her new bedroom. Hopefully, she would be ready for her new bed and to help design her new bedroom later in the year when things had quieted down again.

Josie was a bright, energetic toddler who was inquisitive and into everything. She had moved quickly through her biting phase, thankfully. Drew had been the unluckiest victim due to nothing other than easy access. She had bitten two kids at daycare but then, only three months later, she had stopped. Everything they had read told them most kids that bit were simply frustrated at not being able to communicate any other way. In Josie’s case, the number of words in her vocabulary had definitely increased as her biting incidents decreased and the entire household was grateful. For such a small child she sure was good at climbing and she had just mastered the one-handed grab so everybody had to pay attention to the little redhead all the time.

On Wednesday of the second week of May, Ashlyn had been officially put on bedrest and Ali was going to take the kids back to daycare so her wife wouldn’t be tempted to get up and do anything for or with them. She took them to daycare on Thursday and planned to take them Friday as well.

“Please Ali, please let them stay home tomorrow” she begged Thursday night. “Today was awful and I was so bored and I don’t know how I’ll get through tomorrow, forget about the next five days...”

“Ash, honey, calm down” the brunette sat next to her frazzled wife on the edge of the bed and held her hand. “This stress is part of the problem too” she said softly and focused her cinnamon eyes on her keeper’s anguished face.

“I know” Ashlyn sighed. “I think the cure might be worse than the disease in this case” she chuckled and lifted her eyes back up. “I tried so hard to nap and meditate and read and think and write and...”
“Sweetheart, that doesn’t sound relaxing at all” Ali shook her head and cupped her wife’s cheek as they studied each other’s faces for a moment. “Tell me how having the kids here tomorrow will make any of that better” she asked sincerely, hoping there was a really great answer coming in return.

“Well” the blonde paused and swallowed. She realized that she didn’t have a good answer to that question and her mind started to race. “We can snuggle up and watch movies together and...and...I can read to them.”

“All day? Babe, I’m sorry you’re stuck on bedrest and I would do anything to change that for you. I swear to God I would.” The brunette spoke softly and carefully. She was well aware that her wife was not in a good mood and she couldn’t blame her for a second. “But you and I both know neither of our kids is going to sit quietly with you all day and I don’t want my mom to have to take care of both of them and you...”

“Yeah, just forget it” she snapped and pulled her hand back as she turned her head sharply away from Ali.

Neither woman said anything for a long, full minute, but the brunette didn’t move either. She honestly would switch places with her keeper right that second if she could and relieve her discomfort and her anxiety and her frustration. Ali had been a borderline saint throughout Ashlyn’s entire pregnancy. Most of it was simply because she loved her wife more than she could even comprehend and was willing to forgive her almost anything and to do almost anything for her. But part of it was because there was someplace inside her that still felt guilty that she couldn’t carry their next child. Part of her blamed herself for Ashlyn retiring so she could have a baby. If she had been able to carry another child maybe her keeper would have completed her rehab and been able to play one last season where she could have been feted and celebrated at every away game. The brunette had never admitted this to anybody. Not Kyle or Sydney or even her therapist, Mattie. But it was there, deep inside her. Ali had learned from experience, sometimes most painful, that she didn’t have to give it a voice and feed it. She had matured over the past two years and learned a lot about herself, both her strengths and her weaknesses. The Ali from two years ago probably would have brought the subject up with her wife, regardless of how stressed out the blonde already was, and insisted on talking it all out. She was still a big proponent of open and honest communication and she always would be. But she had also learned, after almost six years of marriage, that talking about everything your mind chewed on wasn’t always the best way to go about things. She wasn’t hiding anything other than a slightly paranoid, ‘worst case scenario’, self-flagellating guilt trip. Telling Ashlyn about it wasn’t going to do either one of them any good. Ali didn’t care exactly where her motivation came from on any given day. She enjoyed taking care of her wife every day and even more so now that she was pregnant. The brunette had picked up all of the extra slack that came as her keeper gradually became less and less able to do things over the past four or five months. She hadn’t done anything more than what Ashlyn had done for her and their family during her two pregnancies, but it had been a little bit more challenging simply because there were two toddlers to take care of as well. Ali was amazed at how quickly her anger or frustration towards her keeper would disappear, in most cases anyway. If she took a minute and a deep breath then none of it mattered. The only thing of any importance was taking care of Ashlyn and their babies and it made Ali feel good to do it.

“Hey” she patted her wife’s leg with the hand that had just been holding Ashlyn’s. “I know you’re miserable and that sucks. It’s going to be a long, tough week for you and I will help you in any way that I can. You know that, right?”

Ashlyn turned her head back to look at her kind and patient wife and dropped her eyes, shamefully.

“I’m sorry Al” she sighed heavily and rested her head back against the pillow as she leaned against
the headboard. “Don’t listen to me, I’m a mess.”

“How about I rub your legs while we talk some more?”

“It’s ok...” the blonde began but her wife was already shifting position so she could massage her aching legs.

Part of the bedrest orders were no sex until further notice. The doctor was concerned that an orgasm would stimulate other uterine contractions and bring on early labor. That was to be avoided at all costs as they tried to get to week 37 and the fully functional lungs milestone. Ashlyn loved Ali’s massages, but any time the brunette’s hands were on her she almost lost control.

“How about if we try one kid tomorrow?” Ali proposed after several minutes of quiet massage. “Which one do you want?” she chuckled at the way her words sounded coming out of her mouth.

“Yeah, that’s not the way to say that” the keeper laughed. “But, ummm, I’ll take Josie to start with. What do you think?”

“I think you’re brave and crazy, babe” the brunette giggled. “But she’ll love a day with her mama.”

Ashlyn’s face was glowing again and she closed her eyes as Ali kept rubbing her feet. Deb called up the backstairs to tell them that dinner would be ready in a few minutes.

“Thanks mom, be right down!” Ali yelled back.

“I don’t suppose that I can come down and eat dinner...”

“Sorry” Ali got up off the bed and leaned down to kiss her keeper’s lips. “No stairs, remember?” She kissed her again and let her lips linger. “One week sweetheart, for our babies. You can do it, I know you can.”

“For the babies...I can do it” the keeper smiled up at Ali. “I can Al. I promise.”

Ali called Dr. Comello in the morning to talk about some possible solutions that might make the rest of the seven days more bearable for everybody. They completely changed what they had done the first day, with the doctor’s permission. Instead of Ashlyn being quarantined up in her bedroom as if she had the plague, she was allowed to go downstairs in the morning and then upstairs at night but that was it. She was to take her time and go slowly and carefully and either Ali or Deb was to help her, preferably both. No exceptions. They set the keeper up in the living room on the couch for the remainder of her week of bedrest and she was much happier there.

“I don’t know how that’s going to give you any peace and quiet or relaxation” Deb chuckled as she helped her daughter-in-law onto the couch late Friday morning after getting Ali’s phone call. “But I guess it’s worth a try.”

At any given moment during the rest of her bedrest, Ashlyn had one or both kids and usually both dogs snuggled up on or near her. She did a wonderful job of not moving around very much and staying still and restful. The kids watched tv with her, read books with her, and interacted with her in dozens of different ways each day. Deb or Ali would bring in everybody’s food and they would all eat together around the coffee table, even at dinnertime because it was a special week. It was hard to explain what was going on to the kids because they were just too young to understand. They knew Ashlyn wasn’t sick but they also knew that she had to ‘rest’ and that they were to be very gentle with mama and the babies in her belly. One night Ashlyn slept down on the couch because she had been too tired to make it up the stairs. She was exhausted and didn’t even want to try so Ali didn’t push her. Instead, she went and brought down a sheet and pillow and pajamas and whatever else the
blonde needed to get ready for bed. She didn’t like her keeper sleeping downstairs alone and when she ran into her mother in the second-floor hallway she told her she was going to go sleep with her on the other half of the couch, just in case Deb needed her in the middle of the night.

“Baby, what are you doing?” Ashlyn asked in a quiet voice when she felt the couch move and saw her wife settling in with her pillow and another sheet.

“I’m sleeping with you silly.”

Ashlyn’s heart soared and she fought off another urge to cry. She didn’t really care about sleeping downstairs by herself, until that moment when she realized how happy she was to have Ali on the couch with her.

“Thanks honey” she whispered. “I love you.”

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Wednesday morning, after the week of bedrest, they went to their 37-week appointment, which was the 4th milestone. The good news was that their lungs were capable of functioning at full capacity. The bad news was that Ashlyn’s blood pressure was still too high. Dr. Comello sent them home with pre-operative instructions and told them to come back early Friday morning for the scheduled c-section that would welcome their twins to the world. The babies were healthy and grown enough so it was safe to go ahead and deliver them two weeks early without any concerns about their development. Dodge was still in the breach position so they would definitely have to do the c-section but Ashlyn had already come to grips with that. She was looking at the positives about it instead of the negatives, and in all honesty, she just wanted them out. She didn’t really care anymore about how it happened.

Neither woman slept much the night before. They were both nervous and excited and a little scared.

“You did it babe” Ali kissed her wife’s lips as she got into bed Thursday night. “You got these babies through 37 weeks and I can’t believe we get to finally meet them tomorrow morning.” The excitement in her voice was impossible not to notice. “I’m so fucking proud of you Ashlyn. So fucking proud.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you baby” the keeper replied and smiled adoringly at her wife. “Thank you for being such a rock star, every step of the way.”

They talked for a few more minutes before reminding each other that they should really try and get some sleep before their big day. Ali helped her wife roll over onto her other side and then rubbed her back a little bit before spooning her from behind. They lay there like that, lost in their own thoughts and trying not to keep the other awake as their minds raced excitedly. To Ashlyn’s great surprise, she found that she was far more excited than she was frightened and that gave her a big boost of confidence as she finally drifted off to a fitful sleep.

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The next morning, May 13th, Ashlyn and Ali were in the friendliest looking operating room they had ever seen. Maybe it was the smiling faces of the anesthesiologist, and the nurses that made the antiseptic room seem warm and inviting. They could only see their eyes over their masks too so it was peculiar and they talked about it for a couple of minutes as they held hands and waited for the spinal block to go into effect. That had been the biggest challenge so far, the spinal block. Ashlyn hated needles and was a real baby about them. She had soldiered through the IV that the nurse had administered as soon as she was wheeled into the operating room and even tolerated the tiny
injection in her back that felt like a pinprick and numbed the area so she couldn’t actually feel the big, long spinal block needle once the anesthesiologist inserted it into her spine. The couple had researched planned c-sections and watched some videos so they both knew what was going to happen. Ashlyn had a blue hospital gown on, open in the back, with a sterile cap on her head. Ali wore a yellow sterile gown, gloves and cap as she sat to one side of her wife’s head, holding her hand tightly. The anesthesiologist sat opposite her, on the other side of Ashlyn’s head and monitored her carefully throughout the procedure. Even Ali paled a little bit when she saw the size of the spinal block needle. It was scary looking and the brunette was glad Ashlyn didn’t have to see it. She lied through her teeth as she helped her wife sit up and lean forward as far as she could so her spine curved. Her enormous belly made this very difficult and the keeper had a hard time breathing but she did it.

“Oh, it’s not really that big” Ali patted her keeper’s shoulder. “The one we saw in the video was much bigger than this one. You’re doing great Ash.”

The nurses started to prep Ashlyn’s stomach for the surgery after she lay back down and waited for the spinal block to take effect. They shaved the area around where the incision was going to be, which was just above her pubic hair line, and then washed it with an antiseptic solution. They inserted a catheter into her bladder and put sterile drapes across her stomach, and then finally put up the short screen that would block Ashlyn’s view of the surgery. Ali and Ashlyn had discussed with Dr. Comello what they wanted to do. Ashlyn wanted to watch the babies coming out of her but didn’t want to see the actual incision being made or anything too gory. She wasn’t great with blood and guts. Ali wanted to watch everything. So they opted for the clear, plastic short screen so Ali could watch and she would tell Ashlyn when it was ok to look. Otherwise the keeper was just going to look up at the ceiling instead.

It took about thirty minutes for the spinal block to kick in and for all of the prep to be completed. Patty came into the room and walked right up to both women and greeted them, making sure Ashlyn could see her and know it was really her and help her relax a bit.

“How are we doing Ash?” Dr. Comello asked as she took her place on one side of the operating table and grinned back up at her patient.

“Good doc, I’m good. I think. Although I can’t feel anything from my boobs down so I’m gonna have to trust you on this one” she chuckled and Ali giggled, amazed that this woman she loved could be so at-ease in such a big and potentially stressful moment.

“Well that’s great. That means we can get started” Patty chuckled back. “Are you guys ready to meet your babies?”

“Hell yes!”
“Yeah, please.”

They both answered at the same time and Ali felt her keeper squeeze her hand even tighter. The brunette couldn’t take her eyes off of Patty’s hands although she couldn’t see too much because she was sitting down and the sterile drapes covering Ashlyn’s big belly blocked her view. She wanted to watch her favorite face during the procedure too so she just focused on Ashlyn until there was something she could see through the clear, plastic screen. Dr. Comello made the horizontal incision, just like the one Ali had, into the keeper’s lower abdomen and kept going through the different layers until she got to the uterus. There were some whirring sounds and some unpleasant smells that could only be described as burning flesh as she worked.

“That sound you’re hearing is just us cauterizing some tiny blood vessels as we get to your uterus Ash. Nothing to worry about” the doctor explained. “You’re also going to hear us suctioning most of
the amniotic fluid out of your uterus once I cut through it in a second. Also perfectly normal.”

Sure enough, a minute later they heard the suctioning and Ali watched Patty reach into her wife’s body, she couldn’t actually see the incision because of the keeper’s big belly though. Ashlyn grimaced and her eyes went wide. She squeezed Ali’s hand so hard the brunette felt sure it was going to break.

“Ash, are you ok?” she put her head close to her wife and spoke quietly and as calmly as possible.

“I think I’m gonna throw-up” she replied and squeezed her eyes shut tight.

“Hold on Ash, that feeling usually passes in a minute or two” Dr. Comello said, still working on getting Baby A out of Ashlyn’s uterus. “Your son is breach, remember? So I just have to take a little bit more time and make sure nothing’s tangled up...” she paused and then Ashlyn gasped and opened her eyes wide again. “Here we go” Patty’s soothing voice made both nervous moms feel a little better. “Your son is beautiful, ladies” she held him up a little bit above Ashlyn’s belly so they could see him for a quick minute. “We’re just going to clean him up a little bit and help him get some fluid out of his lungs...”

“Why isn’t he crying?” Ashlyn asked, starting to sound desperate.

“It’s ok babe...” Ali tried to calm her down.

“Since he didn’t get squeezed out through your vaginal canal some leftover fluids are still in his lungs but that’s nothing to worry about. He’s doing fine. He’ll cry in just a minute or two.”

The nurses had suctioned the mucus away from his eyes and all of the rest of his orifices and, sure enough, his loud little cry filled the room a couple of minutes later.

“There he is” Patty made eye contact with Ali and grinned.

“Can you hear that Ash?” Ali asked excitedly as she watched her wife’s face break into a smile.

“Sounds beautiful” she said softly and then winced.

Patty had started to get to work on his twin sister and one of the nurses was up near the top of Ashlyn’s belly, ready to push down on it.

“Ok, it’s time to meet baby sis. Sharon here is going to push down on your belly where I ask her to so we can get this little baby closer to where I need her. In a few minutes you’re going to feel that tugging again Ash but it’ll pass just like before. Ok?” the doctor explained and then asked.

“Ok doc. I’m ready.”

“You’re doing great, honey.” Ali leaned over, kissed her keeper’s cheek, and gave it a little nuzzle with her nose.

Just as Patty had described, nurse Sharon pushed on the outside of Ashlyn’s baby bump and guided their baby girl a little lower so Dr. Comello could reach her.

“Oh God” the keeper grunted when she felt the pressure.

She was numb but she could feel the tugging and pushing. It didn’t hurt, it just felt – surprising and weird.

“You’re not feeling any pain, right Ash? Just the pressure and the tugging?” the doctor quickly
“Yep. No pain” she squeezed Ali’s hand again, hard.

Dr. Comello repeated the steps she had done the first time and, in what seemed like hardly any time at all, their baby girl emerged, head first as was more typical.

“Here’s your beautiful baby girl” Patty grinned again and held the newborn up for them to see.

“You did it Ashlyn” Ali kissed her cheek and her forehead and her hand. “I’m so proud of you.”

“While we clean her up would you like to try breastfeeding your son?” Patty asked. “We’ve still got to take care of the placentas and then stitch up your uterus and your abdomen so it’s going to be about an hour, maybe a little less…”

“Yes, I want to hold him and feed him” Ashlyn spoke clearly.

“Would you like to cut the cord Ali?”

One of the nurses brought little Dodge, diapered and loosely wrapped in a sterile blanket, up towards his moms and Ali cut the umbilical cord and then watched as the nurse carefully handed him to Ashlyn.

“Are you feeling strong enough to hold him Ash?” Patty asked, glancing up to look at her patient. “It’s ok if you aren’t. Ali or one of the nurses can help you.”

“I can do it” she answered and let go of her wife’s hand so she could hold her baby boy.

Ali pulled down Ashlyn’s hospital gown so her left shoulder and breast were exposed and helped her get that all-important skin-to-skin contact. They decided to just start with that for the moment and enjoy one amazing moment at a time. There were tears of joy in the keeper’s eyes as she leaned down and kissed her son’s practically bald head. Ali had her hand on his back and made sure the blanket stayed up over it because it was cold in the operating room. She loved the fact that when she looked down at Dodge and Ashlyn she could see her ‘wisdom listens’ tattoo on the top of her left shoulder. She wished someone could take a picture of that for her.

“Look at our son” Ashlyn squeaked out emotionally as she met her wife’s eyes and grinned.

“He’s beautiful” Ali breathed out. “So beautiful.”

Ashlyn occasionally winced when she felt a tug as they delivered both placentas through the openings they had made in her uterus and stomach. Then she felt smaller, more minor tugs as she got stitched up. It was only another five minutes before it was time to cut the cord for their daughter and get her into place on the other side of Ashlyn’s chest.

“Oh sweet girl” the keeper cooed when she met her baby daughter.

Ali turned around on her swivel stool so she could keep a hand on each baby’s back as they rested on their mama’s bare chest.

“If you need me to take one, just tell me” she told her wife.

“Oh, do you want to?”

“No honey” she shook her head and smiled. “They’re right where they’re supposed to be. Just tell me if you get tired, babe.”
The two women shared a look that was full of so many powerful emotions that they knew they would never forget that moment as long as they lived. Ali was beaming with pride and relief and happiness as she watched her beloved wife move her eyes from one baby to the other and then back up to the brunette who had made this whole world possible for her. Ashlyn’s face was one big, enormous grin – it didn’t even really look like her for a few minutes because it was such an exaggerated expression stretching the features of her face into new and unfamiliar positions. Ali leaned forward and joined their lips together in a kiss that was tender but loving and intimate. It was a surprisingly public display for her but, in that moment she didn’t care about anything other than the three souls right in front of her.

“I’m so fucking proud of you Ash” she spoke from only an inch away from her keeper’s face. “I love you” her voice cracked as her emotions finally got the best of her and the tears started to fall.

“Aw, baby...” Ashlyn wanted to comfort her but there was nothing she could do.

“I’m ok” Ali said quickly and straightened up. She forced a smile through her tears to try and show her wife that she was just fine. “Really, I’m just happy. I can’t describe it...”

The whole thing took just under two hours by the time they wheeled Ashlyn and her babies into the post-op recovery room. Both babies had been weighed, measured, suctioned and cleaned and were declared healthy. Dodge Christopher Krieger was born at 9:47am, weighing 5 pounds, 12 ounces. And Lilian Isabella Krieger had followed fifteen minutes later, at 10:02am, weighing 5 pounds, 6 ounces. Ashlyn had also come through the operation with flying colors and would remain numb for another couple of hours. The catheter made more sense when she learned that. The lactation specialist came into the operating room soon after their baby girl had been placed on her mama’s chest and Ashlyn decided it was time to try breastfeeding her son. One of the nurses picked Lily up and gave her to Ali to hold so Ashlyn could concentrate on nursing Dodge.

The brunette practically melted when she first held her tiny little girl in her arms. Lily was the smallest of all of their babies. Even sickly little Josie had weighed more at 5 pounds, 10 ounces. She still weighed less than Dodge, even as a twin, did. But Josie had enjoyed the luxury of her own, spacious womb just like Drew before her. He was the biggest. He had waited two extra weeks too, no wonder he was 7 pounds, 2 ounces when he finally made his appearance. Ali marveled at the small little human in her arms, with her face scrunched up and the salve still covering her closed eyes to fight against infection. She had a beautiful, round head with barely any hair on it and a perfect little face. The brunette wrapped the blanket around her, swaddling her, and held her close to her chest, hoping she could hear her heartbeat and that it might soothe her and remind her a little bit of where she had just spent almost nine months. Ali watched her wife carefully, but tried not to make her feel uncomfortable. She remembered very well how stressful it was the first several times she tried to breastfeed Drew. It had felt like the weight of the world had been on her shoulders.

“Sometimes when they’re so little their mouths just can’t figure the nipple out right away” the lactation specialist explained almost cheerfully. “Whatever happens, don’t give up and don’t feel like it’s not working” she encouraged with a hand on Ashlyn’s bare shoulder. “Everything about this is new to him and he has to learn how to do it, that’s all.”

The baby cried and the keeper’s face was creased with worry and tension. She looked desperately at Ali.

“He won’t take it. He doesn’t want it...” she stated in a slightly panicked voice.

Ali knew that her wife was fighting hard to stay calm. They had talked about this moment many times over the past several weeks and the key takeaway had always been to be patient. The brunette held her wife’s gaze and willed her to relax. She focused her cinnamon eyes and tried to use them to
reach inside Ashlyn and slow down her racing heartbeat and rushing blood.

“It’s ok. He will. Just maybe not right now” she spoke slowly as she watched the lactation specialist help move Ashlyn’s large breast into a different position and let the baby boy try again. “Just give him some time.”

“The smaller they are the more difficult it is for them at first” Patty added as she continued working. “You may need to try a nipple shield at some point to see if that helps.”

“Their mouths sometimes aren’t big enough to take the nipple and it’s difficult for them to get a good latch” the lactation specialist added. “Let’s see if we can get him to try again.”

Ali stayed quiet, knowing another voice in her keeper’s ear wasn’t going to help much, but she looked at Ashlyn’s face again and took a deep breath, and then another. The blonde followed her lead and took two or three deep breaths of her own and made herself relax as much as she could. Ali smiled at her and nodded her head and then reached over and rested her hand on her wife’s arm. She was trying to stay out of the way because Ashlyn was nursing from her left breast which was the side Ali was sitting on as well as the side the lactation specialist was standing on. Ali placed her warm hand on her wife’s forearm as it supported their infant son. Neither of them had ever been able to explain it, but they had always enjoyed a hidden benefit of their own skin to skin contact. It just made them feel better. It was that simple. Feeling Ashlyn’s hand on her thigh or her back or her elbow or her anyplace just made Ali feel better. It calmed her or steadied it. It helped her focus or it turned her on. Whatever it was that she needed, that touch from her keeper gave her. It had always been that way and it was the same for Ashlyn in return.

“Ok baby boy” Ashlyn spoke softly to her son and kissed his head again. “Let’s try it this way and see if you like it better. I know you’re hungry, so let’s do this.”

After several more, slightly less tense minutes, and two different positions, Dodge latched on and started to nurse. It wasn’t a very good latch but he seemed to be getting some of the colostrum that he was looking for. Ali was happy that the lactation specialist let the latch be ok for that moment. Ali knew it wasn’t a good one and she was surprised it wasn’t causing Ashlyn some pain. But it was an important win for both mom and new baby even if it was far from perfect.

“Oh thank God” Ashlyn exhaled and let her head rest back against the pillow for a minute. She looked a little pale but happy. “What about Lily? Do we need to get her a bottle? Or is she ok to wait?”

“She looks like she’s just fine where she is right now” the lactation specialist smiled. “I know mothers of twins are always hearing about breastfeeding them at the same time, but that’s a pretty advanced level” she chuckled. “One at a time is best for everybody until you’re really confident about what you’re doing and at least one of them is an expert at getting and keeping a good latch. Otherwise you’re just asking for trouble.”

“We don’t need any more trouble” Ashlyn gave a small, tired smile to her wife who was still holding Lily and beaming back at her. “Do we honey?”
The Twins

It was so surreal to have two brand new babies in their arms less than four hours after arriving at the hospital. Neither of their previous experiences had been anything like this. They spent about an hour in the post-op recovery room with both babies and the only real problems were the breastfeeding and then Ashlyn throwing up. Just as she had finished nursing Dodge while they were still in the operating room, she felt an overwhelming wave of nausea and managed to turn her head away from him and Ali and Lily seconds before puking. She hadn’t eaten anything since midnight, per her pre-op instructions, so there wasn’t much to come up, but she had thrown up every thirty minutes or so ever since then. The anesthesiologist, after conferring with Dr. Comello, told the couple that Ashlyn was most likely experiencing some of the side effects of the spinal block. The nausea would wear off as the drug did, which, unfortunately, wasn’t until almost three hours after they left the operating room. Because Patty was worried about Ashlyn being dehydrated after not drinking anything since midnight and the surgery and the throwing up, she made Ashlyn keep the IV and catheter in until the next morning, which was longer than usual. But she wanted to get her hydrated again. The c-section itself had been as text-book as they come, except for Dodge being in the breach position. But there were no complications and everything on the inside of the keeper was in good shape.

It was just after 2pm when they finally made it up to their mother/baby suite. It was the same type of room as the two they had used previously, except this one was a little bit bigger.

“We gave you the repeat customer discount this time” Dr. Comello joked when she entered the room to check on the little family as they settled in. “There are two of these rooms that are bigger and we try to keep them for the multiples if we can. We lucked out with the scheduling so here you are” she spread her arms out, palms up, and motioned glamorously around the room.

“Thanks Patty, we appreciate it” Ali smiled back at her from her seat next to the bed.

It was the same set up as before with the hospital bed and the extra cot for Ali to sleep on and the big bathroom with the shower inside. The extra room would definitely be helpful because there were two bassinettes instead of one this time. They would be staying for four more days, assuming there were no further complications, and going home on Tuesday. Ashlyn didn’t have the extra surgical work that Ali had to have done with Josie’s birth so it was considered a typical c-section. The nice insurance plan Ali had chosen for Knight-Harris allowed them two extra days in the hospital and they gladly took them.

“Are you starting to feel better yet Ashlyn?” she asked her patient as she walked over to her and took her pulse, felt her forehead and the lymph nodes in her neck.

“I just want to stop puking before the spinal block wears off because it’ll hurt like hell...”

“I don’t blame you. I encourage all my patients to take the pain medicine for the first couple of days after surgery. It helps you get up and move around again which is so important. I know many of you don’t like to” she quirked her eyebrow at the blonde, “and I respect that. I just don’t understand why you’d willingly be in pain when you could be doing more with your babies without it.” She shook her head. “Either way, try not to overdo anything. No lifting! I don’t care how big your muscles are” she teased.

“Can we please take the catheter out?”

“Not until the IV comes out...”
“And when will that be?”

“Tomorrow morning...”

“Patty, please. I promise I’ll drink a ton of water.” Ashlyn put both her hands together in prayer as she pleaded with the doctor. “And we’ll be up feeding the babies so it’s not like I’ll sleep too long without drinking. Please, Patty” the keeper begged.

“Let’s just see how it goes over the next several hours. If you do well I’ll see about taking the IV and the catheter out after dinner...”

“Yes!! Thanks Patty, you’re the best!”

“Hey now, I haven’t said yes to anything yet” she cautioned and tried not to grin at her enthusiastic patient.

“You see how it is now, don’t you?” Ali giggled as she looked at the friendly and patient doctor.

“I’m starting to figure a few things out” she agreed with a chuckle.

Just then a nurse wheeled a baby gurney into the room with both babies swaddled and side by side, freshly back from some tests and measurements and treatments. Dr. Comello had ordered some additional tests for their lungs just to be safe and they had both passed with flying colors. Lily was a little small and had almost needed to go to the NICU but Patty didn’t want to do that unless there was a problem with her lungs. And after the extra lung test she was happy with both babies’ health and condition.

“Right on cue” the doctor laughed softly because Dodge had fallen asleep during the trip back to the room.

Ali got to her feet quickly, picked up Lily and placed her on her wife’s chest for some more skin to skin time while Patty went down her list of questions. The brunette carefully picked up Dodge and carried the sleeping boy back over to the other side of the bed where she sat back down in the chair, holding him close to her chest and breathing in his precious scent. Dr. Comello ran through the standard reminder that even though she had had a c-section delivery Ashlyn was still going to be experiencing all of the post-partum changes to her body that any other pregnant woman would. She just didn’t have the beat-up birth canal to deal with. Instead, she had a surgical incision. They talked about the uterine cramps she would feel as her uterus gradually started to go back to its normal size and shape, the discharge that would leave her body as the uterus sloughed off all the extra things it didn’t need any longer to take care of two babies, and the colostrum and milk timetable that her breasts would be working with to feed the two newborns. As Ashlyn answered the doctor’s questions and asked a few more of her own, Lily started trying to move down closer to her mama’s nipple.

“Looks like someone’s not afraid to try again” Dr. Comello grinned. “Honestly Ash, don’t worry about the breastfeeding so much right now. The more you can do, the better, obviously, but don’t let it stress you out because that just makes it harder.”

Ashlyn helped her daughter by moving her down into a better position to nurse and then let the tiny human try to find the nipple on her own. It was amazing to watch her small head and face and mouth work hard to get to the prize. She finally did it, latching onto the nipple and starting to suckle. Again, it wasn’t a very good latch but it was better than nothing for the time being.

“She did it” the keeper looked over at the brunette and smiled broadly. “She found it on her own.”
“See babe, sometimes it just takes a while. I got really lucky with Drew because he was just a real natural. He was also almost two whole pounds bigger than her” she chuckled. “You’re doing great.”

“I concur” Dr. Comello smiled warmly at the cute family in front of her. “I’ll be back in a little while to check in again. But the main thing now is to feed them...” she looked down at her tablet, “every two and a half hours so we can try and fatten them up a little bit before you take them home. If they do well overnight we’ll cut back to three hours tomorrow and go from there. And remember, if you need a break just call for the nurse and she’ll take them down to the nursery for a few hours. There’s no shame in that.”

“Thanks doc.”

“Oh, and you have visitors.”

Whitney, Kyle and Deb sat around the room with ridiculous grins on their faces. It was Friday mid-afternoon and another wave of visitors would be coming after work and dinner. Ryan was away for a game and Nathan had to stay back in NYC which was unfortunate because Ali and Ashlyn really wanted to have all the godparents together for the official announcement.

“Thanks Whit” Ashlyn mumbled around a mouthful of food as she sat propped up in bed. The lawyer had brought in some healthy, easy to digest, gentle on the stomach Thai food for the new moms who were both starving. It had been almost an hour since the keeper had last vomited and she was feeling better all the time. “I don’t know how people do surgery in the afternoon” she shook her head. “I was starving this morning at 8am.”

“If you guys keep doing this so often, you’ll have all the kinks worked out so by the time it’s my turn we’ll have a fool-proofed plan” she giggled from her spot on the edge of her best friend’s hospital bed. “You’re welcome mama, happy to help.”

“Ok I can’t stand it anymore” Kyle said as he anxiously approached his sister-in-law from the other side of the bed. “Which one is mine?” his eyes were bright and his smile enormous.

“Kyle” Deb chastised from the chair where she was holding Dodge who had just had another challenging session at Ashlyn’s breast. “Really?” she gave him the dirtiest look the keeper had ever seen Deb give anyone.

Ali and Ashlyn, mouths full, looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders. The brunette finished chewing and wiped her mouth. She pushed the wheeled tray table away from the cot, stood up and walked over to the bassinet next to Ashlyn’s bed where Lily was sleeping.

“We wanted to wait until all four of you were together but now seems like a good time, if you don’t mind your husbands not being here” she looked from Kyle to Whitney and then back to Kyle.

“I think I’ve made it very clear that I can’t wait” Kyle chuckled. “How about you Whit?”

“Ryan will totally understand” she smiled and carefully shifted her position so she could see Ali better. “What’s going on?”

“Do you really not know?” Ashlyn mumbled again, her cheeks full.

“Kyle, we’d like you and Nathan to be Lily’s godparents” Ali said as she wrapped her arm around her brother’s waist and squeezed him in a side hug. They both looked down into the bassinet, a little teary-eyed.
“Well Lilian Isabella” he started, his voice wavering. “When you wake up we’re going to start to get to know each other a little better” he paused to steady himself. “And I can’t wait.”

“Is the Isabella for who I think it is?” Whitney asked.

“The Lilian was easy, once Meg suggested it back in February” Ashlyn explained, mouth finally empty. “There were a couple other contenders but we both loved the idea of honoring Grandma Lilian more and more as time went by…”

“The Isabella is for Isabella Stewart Gardner” Ali added and looked adoringly at her wife. “And it was Ashlyn’s idea. And I love it.”

“It took me a while but I finally realized she was making sure all the kids had family names that were from my side…”

“Well we all have…” Ali started to interrupt but Ashlyn cut her off with a quirked eyebrow that nobody mistook for anything other than love.

“Yes, we all have your last name honey, but still...I appreciate what you did, more than you can know” she sniffled emotionally as her hormones made their presence felt. “But it was high time at least one of our kids had a name that was important to you too. And I love that place…” she took another breath to steady her voice, “it’s where we were when I first knew I loved you.”

“Aw, that’s the most romantic thing” Deb cooed.

“Then why isn’t Dodge named Kyle?” the bearded man teased. “Or Kenneth?”

“Way to kill the mood Kyle” Ashlyn chuckled and rolled her eyes.

“‘Dodge’ has been promised for almost four years now” Ali winked at her wife and smacked her brother’s arm before hugging him again. “He’s been Dodge Christopher since before Drew was even born. We couldn’t change it” she shrugged her shoulders. “It just didn’t seem right.”

“And the ‘Dodge’ was Grandma Lilian’s maiden name? Do I have that right?” Deb clarified.

“Yes” Ali nodded. “Drew and Josie have middle names for Gram and we wanted to get Grandma Lilian some love with these two babies. But we ended up doing it for their first names this time.”

“And speaking of the littlest man of the hour” the keeper wiped a happy tear off of her face and took a deep breath. “Whitney, we would love for you and Ryan to be Dodge’s godparents, if you would do us the honor?”

Deb stood up and placed Dodge, who was just starting to nod off, in the lawyer’s arms and kissed her cheek.

“Congratulations honey” Deb said softly and then sat back down again.

Whitney was too choked up to speak. She opened her mouth two different times to try and say thank you or maybe something more poignant, but all she could do was fight back her tears and nod her head at her bestie.

“That sounds like a yes to me” Ali smiled and hugged the new godmother from behind. “Thanks Whit, for everything, for always.”

Lily started to wake up a few minutes later and Kyle looked excitedly at his sister.
“Go ahead, but be careful with her head...”

“I know” he said softly as he slid his hands underneath her tiny body and picked her up. “This ain’t my first baby rodeo” he grinned as he cradled her and moved the blanket away from her chin, making sure she could breath. “You guys – she is so beautiful. Seriously, she looks like a perfect little doll.” He blinked a few tears of his own away and held her close. “Except for her hair” he added jokingly. “Figures you give me the one with no hair” he rolled his eyes and braced for the hit he knew he would take from his sister.

“Well mine doesn’t have any either so quit your whining” Whitney finally found her voice and laughed as Ali swatted her brother’s strong shoulder.

“Hey, those are my grandbabies you’re talking about” Deb spoke up. “You both better watch it.”

Lily started to fuss and Ali knew it was time to try feeding her again. She also knew Ashlyn was nervous enough about it and probably didn’t want an audience.

“So are Dad and Vicki with the kids?” the brunette asked, knowing full well that’s where they were.

“Yes, and we should get going Kyle” Deb, picking up her daughter’s cue, got to her feet and hugged and kissed everybody goodbye. “They’re looking forward to their ‘Uncle Kyle time’ so we’d better not keep them waiting.”

Kyle did the same and brought his goddaughter to Ashlyn before following his mom out of the room.

“Goodnight little princess” he whispered as he kissed her head. “See you soon.”

When they had left the room, Whitney got up off the bed, still holding a sleeping baby boy, and moved towards the chair before realizing that the new parents might want some privacy.

“Oh, geez, do you want me to go too?” she blushed a little and moved quickly towards the bassinettes on the other side of the room. “I’m sorry guys. Just a little slow on the uptake this afternoon.”

Ali just looked at Ashlyn, who was already nervous. Maybe it was the brunette who was making the breastfeeding difficult? Ali couldn’t believe she was even thinking it, but who knew?

“Or I could leave if you want” she asked as she searched Ashlyn’s face for the answer.

“Cut it out you guys” Ashlyn replied and swallowed her nerves as she moved Lily to the next breast in the schedule, according to the chart by her bed. “I want you both to stay. Now quit acting so weird and help me figure out how to feed these babies.”

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Patty, true to her word, came back after dinner and, after examining Ashlyn again, agreed to remove the catheter and the IV, essentially freeing the blonde from the last of the things that were tethering her to the bed. That meant the keeper could get out of bed and go to the bathroom and take a shower and move around the room and the hospital if she felt up to it. Ashlyn took her pain meds that afternoon, just before the spinal block was completely worn off. She hated taking them but she and Ali talked about it and decided, together, that Ashlyn being in pain was only going to make the breastfeeding more difficult. A lot of the experts believed that the baby could sense whatever stress or anxiety the nursing mother was experiencing, which was why it was so important to try and stay calm and relaxed, even when the baby was struggling at the breast.
“Then maybe when you take your shower in the morning it won’t hurt so much either” Ali offered, helpfully reminding her wife of the luxury waiting for her in the morning.

“Oh man I can’t wait to take a shower” the keeper breathed out and closed her eyes with a dreamy look on her face.

“And you have the perfect hair for it too” Ali chuckled and leaned over to ruffle her wife’s short, messy hair. “You probably won’t even need my help.”

The thought made Ali sad but in a hopeful way. She hoped her wife wouldn’t need her because that would mean she was feeling strong and recovering well from the surgery. But part of her wanted to be there for Ashlyn the way the keeper had been there for her after Josie’s scary birth.

“Hellooo” the blonde smiled and waved her hand in front of Ali’s face with the distant look on it. “Where did you go? Are you alright baby?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah” the brunette smiled softly and looked down, a little embarrassed. “I was just thinking about how much I needed you when I took my first shower after Josie” she sighed and lifted her eyes with a bashful smile.

“Well you had already stopped taking your pain medicine because you weren’t allowed to shower for a couple of days. It wasn’t really a fair fight” Ashlyn cocked her head and reached her free arm out to take her wife’s.

“That was one of the lowest of the lows for me” the brunette held Ashlyn’s hand in both of her own, moving her thumbs across the back of it in tiny circles as she spoke. “I just felt like I was good-for-nothing. Literally. I finally understood where that saying came from” she picked up Ashlyn’s hand and kissed it. “But you were right there for me. I’ll never forget it.”

They both watched Lily nursing for a few minutes and neither of them said anything for a while.

“I kind of get it a little bit now” the keeper admitted quietly. “Not all of it, but a little bit.”

“Get what babe?”

“The feeling useless and worthless stuff...I don’t know what is going on with Dodge but he just won’t nurse and I know he’s hungry and he’s getting upset because I can’t feed him and I...” she took a deep breath and hoped it was in time to stop the tears from falling again. She was tired of crying. “I just feel like a complete failure.”

Ali squeezed her hand and brought it up to her lips for another kiss. She didn’t say anything because she thought her keeper might have more she wanted to say. After another quiet minute, the blonde continued.

“This is really hard” she whispered. “I mean, it’s amazing and a miracle and all of that awesome stuff too...” she quickly added so she didn’t sound ungrateful.

“You don’t have to do that you know” Ali said calmly, without looking up from their daughter. “Qualify your feelings. It is hard and you’re allowed to think that Ash. There’s no right way to do it, any of it” she met her wife’s gaze and gave her a soft, loving smile. “Every baby is different and poses their own challenges. I mean look at how different everything about Josie was, and is, compared to Drew. They’re all unique. And they’re all hard. And they’re all worth it and they’re all amazing. And I promise you it gets easier. And, I don’t know if you’ve noticed this or not yet” she quirked an eyebrow playfully at her keeper, “but you have two of them!”
They both laughed, softly so they didn’t wake up Dodge, and Ashlyn pulled her beautiful brunette closer to her, trying to get Ali to lie down with her in the hospital bed.

“Oh honey I’d love that but I’m terrified I’ll hurt your incision” Ali resisted and Ashlyn nodded her head in agreement.

“Come give me a real kiss then.”

Ali got on her hands and knees on the edge of the bed where she had been sitting and brought her lips together with her wife’s for a slow, lingering kiss. And, of course, right at that moment, there was a quick knock and Sydney and Dom came through the door.

“Already at it again” the coach joked and shook her head as she grinned at the pair. “Kriegy, give the girl a break. She just popped out twins for you and you’re already on top of her again.”

The many evening visitors came and left and soon it was just the two of them again, alone with their newborn babies. It was a long, difficult night for all of them. Every 2-1/2 hours Ali woke up, checked the chart near Ashlyn on the bed to see which breast was next, picked up Lily and nuzzled her awake with kisses and sweet words, and then gently shook her keeper awake. Ali waited for a minute while Ashlyn raised the head of the bed up and then helped her get the pillows situated around her incision and gently placed their baby girl near the exposed nipple and prayed to God for a good latch and feeding. Lily would nurse for about thirty minutes or so and then Ali would burp her and make sure Ashlyn had whatever she needed – more water, some tissues, something to eat. Then, when the keeper was ready, Ali would repeat the process and bring Dodge to her other breast. The only difference between the two for Ali was that she said a much bigger prayer for their son to get even a mostly-bad latch. They had both given up hoping for a good latch at that point with him. The lactation specialist wanted to do a more thorough examination of his mouth to see if there was a physical reason why he was having such a hard time. Once Lily, who was still not great at it by any means, had started doing better and was actually getting the colostrum from both breasts they started to look at Dodge as the anomaly. Technically, his mouth was a little bit bigger than his sister’s was so he should at least have been able to do as well as she was.

By the time the sixty or seventy-five minutes of feeding was done and the diapers were changed and the input and the output of each child documented, they went back to sleep for another ninety minutes or an hour. Then they woke up and did it again. They just reminded each other that it would never be harder than it was that night. It would get better every day and every night from that point forward.

Day two was a blur of that same pattern on repeat. There were three exceptions to that routine: Ashlyn’s shower, Dodge’s mouth examination, and Dodge’s circumcision. The blonde, who had been so strong the day before, even recovering from the nausea side effects like a champ, was a wreck on Saturday. She cried at or about all three of the schedule deviations that day. She was tired and cranky and hungry and her boobs were killing her and it had only been one fucking day. Ali helped her in the shower, sensing how frayed her wife’s nerves were, and Ashlyn put up no resistance. She sat on the little fold-down stool in the shower and let the brunette take care of everything. She even dozed off for a few minutes as she leaned against Ali while she washed her back and arms.

They moved the circumcision to the afternoon so Dodge would have a chance to eat something before he went through a painful procedure like that. The lactation specialist decided that morning that it was time to express some of the vital colostrum by hand and feed it to Dodge with a tiny little spoon from a small cup. She showed the keeper how best to massage, squeeze and manipulate the colostrum from her breast and then made sure to pass along some tips on getting it into his mouth.
Her eyedropper suggestion turned out to be the most successful that day and they abandoned the spoon and cup. Ashlyn was sad and frustrated that she couldn’t feed her boy but she was happy that he was finally getting the nutrient-rich liquid he had been working so futilely for. The two moms got pretty good at feeding him that way, but it took a long time. It was a slow process but it was better than nothing.

When the lactation specialist came back to report that the examination had revealed that there was nothing wrong with Dodge’s mouth or anything else that they could find, Ashlyn cried again. She was so frustrated and, by this time, a little frightened that she couldn’t help the tears that fell down her cheek. Ali’s heart broke for her wife as she watched helplessly from beside the bed.

“It’s good news though honey, his mouth is working fine” Ali tried to soothe the keeper when they were alone again in the room.

“I know” Ashlyn nodded and sniffled. “Everything is just pissing me off today. I need a fucking timeout or something” she chuckled and threw her head back against the pillow dramatically. “Ugh, I can’t stand myself today.”

“You know, it’s ok for us to ask for help” Ali said carefully. “We’ve never had twins before and that would be hard enough, I think, without having one who won’t eat.” She paused and tried to figure out the right way to make the suggestion she had in mind. “Why don’t we send them to the nursery for a few hours so we can get some rest. You’ve expressed enough colostrum for at least one feeding and maybe even two...”

“Do you really want to do that Al?” Ashlyn’s eyes were big as they registered her surprise.

“I don’t think want really factors in right now” she smiled sweetly at the blonde. “I think we’re both tired and stressed out and maybe a little freaked out. And I think a good nap might just make everything better. Maybe not all better, but definitely better.” She paused and tried to figure out if Ashlyn was quiet because she was upset with her or because she was trying to decide what to do. She gave her another minute. “What do you think?”

As soon as the hustle and bustle of lunch time in the hospital ended, a smiling nurse wheeled the twins and their entire collection of colostrum down to the nursery so their moms could take some time to recover, adjust and reboot. If everything went well, the twins would be back just before dinnertime, about five hours later. Ashlyn had been hesitant until Ali used her secret weapon. It was something that Ashlyn had said time and time again to her over the years as Ali had struggled through whatever sickness she had to take care of their children. Ali rarely said it back to her wife, not because Ashlyn didn’t get sick – she did, but because she wasn’t really sure she believed it. It made logical sense and Ali understood the saying and appreciated the point, but sometimes you just had to muscle through illness when there was shit to get done.

“You can’t take care of anybody else if you don’t take care of yourself first.” Ali gave her wife an adoring smile. “You’ve been telling me that for years sweetheart. Now I’m saying it to you.”

Ashlyn smiled back and a couple of tears started to slide down her cheeks, even as she still smiled.

“Oh honey, I’m sorry...” Ali was shocked at the response her words had caused.

“No, no” the keeper shook her head slowly, still smiling. “I’m ok. These hormones are something else though, I’ll tell ya” she chuckled.

Ali frowned at her, confused.
“Gram used to say that to me all the time” she explained. “That’s where I got it from and every time I hear it, or say it, I think of her. I can hear her saying it just as clear as a bell.”

It was Gram’s saying that finally made the keeper agree to take a break that day. And Ali could not have been more grateful. She made sure Ashlyn had peed and taken her medicine and anything else before tucking her in for a nap and then crashing on the cot herself. When Ashlyn woke up almost four hours later her boobs were killing her and as she sat up without thinking, she twisted to the side and yelped out in pain as her incision reminded her that it was still healing. She put her glasses on her face and started to get out of bed so she could go pee. She didn’t want to wake Ali up if she was still sleeping but she couldn’t quite make out what she was seeing over on the cot.

“There’s sleeping beauty” Whitney called out as she came out of the bathroom. “Looking beautiful as ever I might add” she teased with a chuckle as she crossed to the bed to help her best friend.

“She’s been down with the babies this whole time, hasn’t she?” Ashlyn asked as she noted the empty cot, and it was impossible to tell if she was upset or not.

“Not the whole time…”

“It’s ok” the keeper sighed as they walked towards the bathroom. “If you’re both ganging up on me again I must need it” she laughed. “Thanks Whit.”

Nobody was sure if it was the nap or the break or just Dodge getting hungry enough to try harder at his mama’s breast. Maybe he was afraid if he didn’t do what his mothers were asking him to do he’d have to have another circumcision! But when Ali wheeled the twins back into their room an hour later everything felt better. They knew it wasn’t a permanent change. Both Ali and Ashlyn knew every day was going to be a different challenge. But for the first time that difficult day, optimism and hope were the prevailing winds steering the Mary Sarah and all aboard her. Lily got her first really good latch and Ashlyn’s eyes shot open when she felt the difference. Breastfeeding didn’t have to be painful or stressful. Hallelujah! Dodge got his best latch ever, which was still not very good, and managed to get some of the colostrum right from his mama’s nipple. Huzzah! He had a grumpy old man’s face and it reminded his mothers of Josie’s little face when she was his age. Remembering her battles as a newborn and seeing how far she had come helped keep those early stress-filled days in perspective. The fact of the matter was, Drew had been a champion at nursing and had turned out great. Josie had never once nursed at her mother’s breast and had turned out great. She was just small for her age, but that wasn’t because of what she was fed as an infant. Lily seemed well on her way down Drew’s path. And who knew what Dodge was going to do. But it didn’t matter. They weren’t going to let him starve. Whether or not he ever figured out how to nurse at Ashlyn’s breast or not he was going to thrive and grow and turn out great. And none of it was any reflection on the keeper as a mom or a woman or a wife. They were the Kriegers and they were the best team around and they were going to find a way through the challenging days that lay ahead, and they were going to do it together.
The five days in the hospital raced by and neither Ashlyn nor Ali really had much memory of their time there. It literally felt like all they did was feed the babies on an endless loop. It got a little better each day as the time between feedings increased gradually. Instead of feeding them every 2-1/2 hours, as they did through the weekend, they moved to three hours starting on Monday. Ashlyn’s milk came in Tuesday morning and that seemed easier for both babies to drink. Lily got better and bigger and stronger every day, while Dodge lagged behind. He was ok and not in any danger, but he certainly wasn’t doing as well as any of them wanted or expected. He had been the bigger of the two babies by a hefty six ounces and Lily had almost made up all of that difference before they left the hospital Tuesday afternoon. The lactation specialist, Dr. Comello and both moms had talked about it and agreed that if Dodge didn’t get better at the breast in the first couple of days they were home then they would try feeding him breastmilk from a bottle. The advantage to the bottle was that they could try any number of different nipples with it and, hopefully, find one that worked for the little guy.

Sunday, day 3, was Mother’s Day and Kyle and Deb brought Drew and Josie to the hospital after Josie’s afternoon nap so they could meet their new siblings and see their moms. Ashlyn’s recovery from the surgery was going very well. She was up and about and trying to stay as active as possible. She was a professional athlete and she had a pretty high threshold for pain so nobody was too surprised that she was recovering well, and quickly. It was still a major surgery and she was still going to have the same limitations put on her activities that Ali and all other c-section moms usually had. Patty reminded both Ashlyn and Ali that the brunette’s situation was more severe because she had the extra repair work to her uterus and she had been in serious condition when the surgery was performed. Not to mention that she was on the operating table for several hours compared to Ashlyn’s less than two. It wasn’t like the two moms were really comparing their recovery experiences in a competitive way, but the doctor knew them both well enough to know that she wanted to just remind them of the important differences between the two.

“Mommy!” Drew yelled as he ran across the room and wrapped his arms around Ali’s legs.

“Hi sweet boy!” she knelt down and gave him a big hug, opening her arms to welcome Josie into the hug a few seconds later as she caught up with her big brother. “Oh little one” she kissed her daughter’s cheek. “It’s so good to see you guys.”

They both looked at the hospital bed where Ashlyn was sitting up and nursing Dodge and then back at Ali.

“Hi guys” the keeper beamed at her two oldest kids as they cautiously approached the bed. “I’ve missed you. Are you being good for Grandma and Uncle Kyle?”

“Ah-huh” Drew nodded. “We had two scoops of ice cream last night” he confessed excitedly.

“You did? Wow, you must have been very good then. I’m proud of you both” the blonde grinned at them.

“Are you ready to meet the babies?” Ali asked, standing behind them and loving how cute they both looked in their dressier than usual outfits. Kyle must have dressed Josie because she looked like a princess and even had curly pink ribbons in her hair. Drew’s hair was slicked down and he had a nice polo shirt on with some adorable seersucker plaid shorts.

“Well your baby brother is eating right now so we’ll let him finish but how about we meet your little sister, Lily?” the brunette sat down on the cot and both kids climbed up with her and waited.
expectantly as Deb picked up the baby girl and brought her to Ali.

Kyle was taking pictures and filming the scene from the other side of the room so the kids didn’t notice him and start hamming it up.

“She’s pretty” Drew said, honestly.

She was a very beautiful baby with light blue eyes, nice round cheeks, and a sweet pink mouth. There was a tiny spot on her left cheek that looked like it might turn into a dimple like her mama’s but Ali wouldn’t let herself even dream of that yet. She had always wanted a baby with Ashlyn’s dimple and, so far, it hadn’t happened yet. But they were only three days old so she was trying to be patient.

“No hay-er” Josie chimed in and giggled as she patted her mommy’s arm and watched the baby closely.

“You’re right Jose” Ali giggled with her. “Do you think she’ll grow some hair?”

“Ah-huh” she nodded and buried her face into the side of Ali’s arm.

“What color hair do you think she’ll have? Red like you or brown like Drew or some other color...”

“Pink!” she yelled and giggled again as Ali laughed with her.

“Pink? Wow, wouldn’t that be something? What do you think Drew?” she poked her quiet son in his belly and made him smile.

“Ummm, brown. Like me” he tilted his chin up proudly.

“Well, I can’t wait to find out” Ali stroked his little cheek as both kids watched the baby girl in her lap and waited for her to do something. “It’ll be like our own mystery and we’ll just have to wait and see what happens.”

Ashlyn had been listening to the whole, adorable conversation and spoke up.

“Wanna switch?” she asked and held Dodge up against her chest to burp him.

Deb carried Lily over to the bed and waited for Ashlyn to move the nursing pillow to her other side and then lay the little girl down on it. She picked up Dodge and brought him back to her daughter on the cot.

“And this is your little brother, Dodge” she made the introductions. “Dodge, this is your big brother Drew and your big sister Josie.”

Dodge was not nearly as aesthetically pleasing as his twin sister. He had a stern look on his face and the same light blue eyes as Lily. It was really hard to say anything else about his face yet because even when he was asleep it seemed to be in a frown. It reminded both Ashlyn and Ali of Josie when she was his age.

“No hay-er!” Josie said excitedly, as if she had picked up on something nobody had noticed yet. She pointed at the baby on her mommy’s lap and giggled again.

“He looks mean” Drew said after observing the little baby for a minute or two.

“Hmm” Ali hummed and thought about what she wanted to say. Drew wasn’t wrong and she didn’t want to laugh his comment off, but poor little Dodge was doing the best he could and mean wasn’t
really what he looked like. “He kind of does a little” she nodded thoughtfully. “Do you think it’s because his face is kind of scrunched up?” she asked, imitating his face as she looked at Drew and then Josie.

“Yeah” Drew agreed and made a wincing face of his own.

“I think he just isn’t very happy yet” she tried to explain.

“No hay-er?” Josie asked and tilted her head at her mommy.

“Maybe” she chuckled. “But I don’t think he even knows he doesn’t have any hair yet. We haven’t told him” she fake-whispered the last part and made Josie laugh. “He doesn’t really feel very good yet so that’s why his face looks like that. He’s definitely not mean though buddy” she spoke to Drew now. “He’s just trying to figure out where he is and who the heck we all are and, maybe, why he doesn’t have any hair.”

They all laughed, even Deb and Ashlyn. Drew and Josie got bored with their new siblings pretty quickly, to nobody’s surprise. They wanted to see their mama. When Lily was finished eating Deb picked her up and burped her and then held her as she sat in the chair. Ali waited for her wife to make the next move and when Ashlyn asked her big kids to come sit with her they were more than ready.

“Now remember, Mama has an ouchie on her belly so we have to be very gentle with her and not touch it at all, ok?” Ali reminded them both as she lifted Drew up and placed him next to Ashlyn so his back was against the bed, just like hers, and the keeper could put her arm around him.

The brunette sat on the edge of the bed on the other side and held Josie on her lap, watching her feet carefully to make sure they didn’t flail out and hit Ashlyn’s incision. The keeper had covered herself pretty well with the nursing pillow and one of her bed pillows but Ali was still nervous. She had taken a few direct hits from 2-year old Drew when she was in a similar condition and it hurt like fucking hell. He was old enough now that he understood what Ali had just told him and he sat carefully next to Ashlyn and talked about what they had done for the past two days with Uncle Kyle and Grandma. Kyle put his camera away, picked up baby Dodge from his bassinette and sat with him on the cot where he and Deb talked quietly about the newest additions to the family.

“Don’t forget to show your moms what you made them for mother’s day now” Deb encouraged and reminded her grandkids with a wink.

“Oh yeah!” Drew’s face lit up as he looked at the paintings at the foot of the bed. Josie clapped her hands and kicked her legs in her excitement but Ali was ready and twisted her little body to the side, away from the keeper’s midsection.

“Careful of Mama’s belly Josie love” she said softly into the back of her daughter’s red head as she stillled her leg with her strong hand and then gave her a kiss.

Ali reached behind her and put two different paintings on Ashlyn’s lap and legs so they could all see them. They were done on 8-1/2 x 11” paper and painted with finger paints.

“Wow, these are great you guys” Ashlyn enthused as she squeezed Drew in a side hug with her right arm and reached over to hold Josie’s hand with her left. “Whose is whose?” she asked with a wink at her wife.

“Mama” Drew gave his mother an adorable attempted eye-roll. “JoJo can’t make a t-wex.”
“Mine” Josie replied and patted the painting closest to her, on Ashlyn’s legs.

“That’s beautiful little one” Ashlyn complimented her daughter’s aggressive use of every single color of finger paint they owned. The result was a swirly painting approximately the color of wet sand. “Thank you for making it for us.”

“Is that a shark in there too?” Ali asked as she tilted her head to try and get a better look at Drew’s painting of two stick figures at the beach with a t-rex, also on the beach, and a shark fin sticking up out of the water.

“Yup” he nodded and grinned.

“Thank you so much honey” the brunette smiled at her son. “I can’t wait for you two to teach your baby brother and baby sister how to paint someday when they’re bigger.”

Just then there was a quiet knock on the door and Ken and Vicki entered the room with two big bags of take-out food for dinner.

“Anybody hungry?” Ken asked with a playful smile.

“Me!” Josie yelled and clapped her hands, making everybody laugh.

Drew wouldn’t commit until he knew what the food was, and then he admitted he was hungry too. Deb and Kyle put the now sleeping babies into their bassinettes and helped get the chicken fingers, French fries, and salads ready for the big kids. They didn’t actually eat the salads. Drew ate the baby carrots and black olives from his and Josie ate the same as well as the cherry tomatoes and cucumbers in hers. Their moms would eat the rest. Ken and Vicki greeted everyone with hugs and kisses and Vicki admired the paintings on Ashlyn’s lap and legs.

“Oh, who did which one?” she asked with a twinkle in her eye.

“Vi-Vi” Drew gave her a look similar to the one he had given his mama a few minutes earlier. “JoJo can’t make a t-wex!”

They had finally settled on a name for Vicki, rather Drew had. Instead of calling her Vicki he had started calling her ViVi, just like he called Tammye ‘GiGi’ but with a ‘V’. It made sense to everybody and it had just stuck. GiGi was pronounced like ‘gee-gee’ and so ViVi sounded like ‘vee-vee’. Silly and sweet and simple.

“Oh my gosh” she played along. “I didn’t know” she shrugged her shoulders and squeezed his shin which was down near Ashlyn’s thigh. “How did you get to be such a good T-rex drawer?”

Drew smiled at the praise and shrugged his shoulders while Ashlyn gave him another little squeeze and chuckled.

“Thanks for doing all of this Vicki” Ashlyn nodded towards the food.

“No problem” she smiled warmly at the keeper. “Thanks for doing all of this” she nodded toward the babies in their bassinettes and winked.

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By the time Ali helped Ashlyn into the big old house on Tuesday, the twins were five days old and getting bigger and stronger. Lily was doing better than Dodge because she was eating more. It was that simple. Now that Ashlyn’s milk had come in she could pump more frequently and regularly
which was better for her breasts and for Dodge. It was sort of a catch-22 situation. The babies needed to get bigger so they could nurse more effectively but they needed the colostrum and then milk so they could get bigger. By about the third day they were home Lily had officially figured out how to get a good latch almost every time and that made both of her moms very happy. Her daily input and output was right where Dr. Comello wanted it to be. The lactation specialist came to visit twice that first week and had crossed Lily Krieger off of her list of newborns to worry about. Dodge on the other hand was a different story. As agreed, when they got home Ashlyn and Ali struggled through two more days of trying to get him to nurse from Ashlyn’s nipples, only to resort to feeding him with the eyedropper, the biggest one possible, when it failed. The lactation specialist brought about a dozen different sizes and shapes of nipples for Dodge to try. The trick was to find one that he could get to work and that also fit with the breastpump, milk storage bag and bottle system they were using. After a long hour of trying almost all of the nipples, Dodge finally found success with a flat, stage 1 nipple. The best news was that Ali was able to find one just like it from their breastpump system so they didn’t have to completely revamp their milk storage and bottle system. That equipment was expensive.

The relief in the house that Friday afternoon was palpable, for Dodge and both of his anxious mothers. Both moms had spent so much time during the past eight days telling each other that it was ok and that their newborn son would figure it out soon and not to worry about it, that they cried together that afternoon once the lactation specialist left the house. Surprisingly it was Ali who lost it first. She had walked the lactation specialist to the door and then put Lily down in the nursery for one of her naps and then walked into the master bedroom where Ashlyn was propped up on the bed, bottle feeding Dodge. Deb and Kyle had taken Drew to the beach while Josie napped. The brunette stood at the foot of the bed taking in the blissful scene in front of her and, after two or three minutes, she just broke down. She covered her face with her hands and turned to run into the master bathroom so she didn’t upset her keeper, but Ashlyn’s voice stopped her.

“No, please don’t go Al, please...” the blonde lifted Dodge up to burp him after he finished his first real, fulfilling meal since his birth a week ago. Her voice was plaintive and needy and it was all she could do to hold it together while she tried to coax a burp from her boy. “Please come here...” she reached out with one long arm and wiggled her fingers at her wife. “I need you.”

Ali hesitated for a second, still sobbing, and then stood next to Ashlyn’s side of the bed, right next to the keeper who grasped her hand tightly. Ashlyn pulled her wife in and wrapped her right arm around her butt and buried her face into Ali’s stomach as she burst into her own tears. The brunette held Ashlyn as best as she could, grabbing onto the back of her shoulders with her left arm and cradling her head with her right. The keeper still held baby Dodge up high against her left chest and shoulder as the two women cried out their anxiety and relief and fear and joy. They both mumbled apologies and heartfelt statements of love and admiration and respect for each other’s strength during such a trying time as they wept. This went on for a full three minutes until Ali realized that both of her wife’s hands were busy and there was nothing holding the pillow against her incision as she cried.

“Oh Ash, your incision” she pulled back so she could confirm her fear and then bent over and pressed her own hand to the pillow over Ashlyn’s incision. “Too much?” she asked quickly and watched her keeper’s messy face.

“A little more...” the blonde replied softly and then, once Ali had applied a little bit more pressure, “perfect, thank you.”

They stayed in that awkward position for another minute as they tried to collect themselves and slow their tears and regain their normal breathing. Dodge finally burped and Ashlyn praised him.
“Good boy Dodge” she cooed. “How does it feel to have a full belly for the first time in your life?” her voice cracked. “I’m so sorry baby boy…”

He burped again and this time there was the unmistakable smell of spit-up accompanying it. Both women chuckled as they pulled apart.

“Tell us how you really feel little man” Ali giggled as she reached for one of the burp cloths next to her wife and traded it to Ashlyn for Dodge. “Come here baby boy, let’s get you cleaned up.”

Fifteen minutes later Dodge was asleep in the bassinette by Ali’s side of the bed and Ashlyn had a fresh button-up shirt on, still unbuttoned. She was breastfeeding and pumping so much that she just kept it open most of the time so she could easily access her breasts. She was heading back to the bed after using the bathroom and Ali slipped into her spot first. The brunette sat on the bed, propped up against the headboard with her legs spread wide. She patted the bed between her legs.

“Can I hold you for a few minutes?” she asked sweetly. Ali remembered how awful it felt sometimes to be hugged or held when she was breastfeeding Drew. The last thing she wanted was anything else hanging onto her for any reason. “I know you’re probably sick of having people hanging onto you…”

“Shhhh” Ashlyn answered with a tired but authentic smile. “I definitely need a hug.”

The keeper sat down carefully, her back to Ali’s front, and put a pillow over her incision just in case she had to sneeze or cough or laugh or cry some more. Ali waited until the blonde was comfortable and then wrapped her arms around Ashlyn’s stomach, carefully finding the spot below her sore breasts and above her painful incision. She squeezed as much as she dared and took all of her keeper’s weight against her with a happy sigh. It was basically a sitting hug and it was the best way they had found to be close those days. Ali kissed the side of Ashlyn’s head as it leaned back against her shoulder.

“I’m sorry I lost it babe” the brunette apologized quietly. “I guess I didn’t realize how stressed out I was about him not eating…”

“It’s ok” Ashlyn squeezed her wife’s arms across her stomach. “I felt the same way. It was sooooo stressful knowing he wasn’t getting what he needed. God, that was awful” she swallowed hard and closed her weary eyes for a minute. “The only reason I got through it is because of you Al” she shook her head slowly. “There were at least two times every day when I just about gave up…” she got choked up and paused. “But you always made me believe we could do it and I don’t know how you did that. Thank you for being so strong, for both of us.”

They were quiet for a few minutes as they thought about their infant son and his week-long struggle to do the most basic human thing. They were quiet for so long that Ali thought her wife might have drifted off to sleep. The poor thing hadn’t had more than three hours of sleep at a time in over a week. Ali just leaned her head back and closed her own eyes, letting her body relax under the comforting weight of the woman she loved.

“You know, you don’t always have to be the strong one” Ashlyn’s soft voice surprised her beautiful brunette. “You’ve done so much for all of us while I’ve been busy growing these babies. I mean, all along, you’ve taken care of me and the kids and the dogs and the house. And you worked fulltime too. You got the house ready for the babies and you got me ready for the babies…”

“Ash...”
“No, really honey, I don’t think I’ve ever thanked you enough for all of that...I don’t know how I could possibly thank you enough.”

“You don’t have to thank me. We’re a team babe, and that’s what I’m here for” Ali lifted her head up and kissed the blonde head on her chest. “You would have done the exact same thing for me if our roles were switched, wouldn’t you?”

“Well, of course, but...”

“Well that’s it then” she paused for a second and brought one hand up to caress Ashlyn’s face. “How can I possibly thank you for everything you did and are doing for our new babies? It’s what families do.”

Ashlyn turned her face towards her wife’s palm and pressed a long kiss into it while she squeezed Ali’s thigh, next to her own hip.

“I’m going to need more of your help and I know it and I’m ready for it” Ashlyn spoke evenly and nuzzled her cheek into her wife’s hand. “I know I can’t take care of them both by myself and I don’t even want to think about trying. I’ll be completely open and honest with you about everything as much as I can. But I need to know that you’ll do the same.”

“We’re going to have a hell of a summer” Ali chuckled softly. “Twice the fun and half the sleep. We have to keep talking about things or we’ll never make it. I agree honey.”

“I’m not pregnant anymore” Ashlyn’s voice was serious now and the brunette heard the difference clearly. “You don’t have to be strong for me anymore. You can forget about what Dr. Comello told you eight or nine months ago. We’ve gotta get back to our 50/50 split, remember?”

A soft smile came to Ali’s face as she listened to her wife’s strong and serious words. She was absolutely right and their joint cry-fest a few minutes ago should have been all the proof either of them needed to remind them of that point.

“You’re right” she nodded slowly. “You’re not fragile and you don’t need me to carry you through our life together” she repeated some of the words that they had said to each other several times over their years together.

“I just need you to walk with me, side-by-side, like our 3-legged race and hold me up when I stumble” the keeper continued repeating more of the words.

“You need to be my equal, not my responsibility...” Ali kissed the side of her head again.

“You need to let me be there for you too. A real, 50/50 partnership.” Ashlyn turned her head up and to the side and waited for Ali to bring their lips together in a soft, meaningful kiss. “We’ll do it together” the keeper whispered against her wife’s soft lips.

“Always.”

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Kyle was staying for two weeks and getting indoctrinated into the sometimes shocking details of raising kids, especially newborns. He wanted to be there for his sister, and his mom, those first two weeks. Nathan stayed in NYC but would be coming up for Drew’s 4th birthday and Memorial Day weekend at the end of Kyle’s second week away. Kyle was able to do some of his course-work from his spot up in Meg’s new room on the third floor. When they moved the office to the loft in the garage they left half of Ali’s custom-made desk behind, just as Niki and Ashlyn had designed it to
do. He and Luna loved their space up there although the 9-year old dog didn’t enjoy the stairs as much as she used to. She had some arthritis in her back that made it a challenge sometimes. But those times were pretty uncommon and most of the time she was her usual, active self. Kyle was turning 40 next month and it was hitting him hard, which might have explained why he was spending this time with his nieces and nephews.

“So freaking out about turning 40 eh?” Ashlyn asked her brother-in-law one afternoon while Josie was napping and Drew was ‘helping’ Grandma in the kitchen.

“No, I’m fine” he lied, embarrassed to admit his own frailty and ego.

The pair was lying on the master bed with Ashlyn in her usual position leaning up against the headboard and Kyle flat on his back with his legs up against the same headboard, but on his sister’s side of the bed. The keeper was nursing Lily and Kyle had Dodge on his chest, fast asleep.

“Kyle, I know you better than you think I do” she looked over at the side of his face as he avoided eye contact and looked straight up at the ceiling. “It’s ok you know, if you are” she put her head back against the headboard and continued. “I’m already freaking out about my 40th and it’s two years away” she chuckled and poked his ridiculously thick thigh.

“Yeah, but look at everything that you’ve accomplished in your life and you’re not even 38 yet” he finally confessed the beginnings of what was bothering him. “And what do I have to show for mine?”

He wasn’t being vain and shallow, the blonde realized as she listened to the pain and shame and disappointment in his voice. He was truly struggling under the heavy weight of feelings of strong self-doubt, questionable self-worth and crippling inadequacy. Ashlyn wasn’t sure why he had chosen her to come and talk to about it, especially now when she was so exhausted that she could barely keep her eyes open at any given time during the day or night. She made a weak mental note to talk to Ali about it so she could help her brother too.

“Are you kidding right now?” she asked as an answer to his question. “You have such a great life dude. I have always envied your friendships, always” she shook her head and patted his arm lightly. “Some people have a few really close friends that would go to war for them and some people have a big bunch of friends that they have fun with and hang out with and maybe one or two of them become close friends. But you have both...well, like an amazing mix of the two.” She paused and tried to get her brain back on track. “I’m not saying this very well and I’m sorry...”

“You’re doing good, keep going, please.”

“You have so many really good, close friends who would do anything in the world for you bro. And that’s really rare. I don’t even know if you know that” she considered for a minute. “But I can tell you for a fact that nobody else I know has friends like you do. And that takes a whole lot of time and effort to be a good friend to so many people Kyle. It’s not like you’re just Facebook friends with these guys.”

“Ok, so I have friends...that just seems so lame when you compare it to...”

“Why the hell are you comparing it to anything?” she cut him off and looked at him until he turned his head and returned her gaze.

“Because that’s what you do when you’re about to turn 40, it’s in all the self-help magazines” he joked, sadly.
“Seriously, I know how tempting it is, but don’t fall for it man. You’re better than that. Life’s too fucking short” she shook her head and her eyes focused on her brother-in-law’s as she spoke seriously and passionately. “Are you happy Kyle?”

“Yeah, I am, I guess.”

“What makes you happy? What do you do every day in your life, back when you’re at home, that makes you happy?”

“I love film school and I can’t wait to direct a movie someday. So all of that makes me happy.” He paused and moved his eyes back to the ceiling as he furrowed his brow and thought some more. “I love walking to get coffee with Nate and Luna in the morning, when we can do it” his face changed instantly to a wide, soft smile that made his eyes crinkle. “And I love to go out to eat with friends or when we go to somebody’s apartment for dinner and we just talk and laugh and before we know it the whole night’s gone and it’s, like, midnight. And I really love posting my videos on YouTube every week. Sometimes it’s a chore and really difficult, but that just means I didn’t pick a good enough topic. But, I don’t know, finding out that something I said or did or videoed gave some complete stranger the strength to make a change in their own life really makes me feel happy. I think that’s what makes me the happiest.”

“I don’t know how you can compare that to anything else” the blonde shook her head in wonder at the surprisingly humble man next to her. “Not to mention how much you help everybody else in your life. Like, hooking me up with Gaga for the MHI. I mean, I don’t even know how to score that one. Listen, I know you didn’t come in here looking for me to just tell you how awesome you are” she quirked an eyebrow at him playfully. “But I honestly don’t think you appreciate what you’ve got and what you give to the people around you. If you did, there’s no way you’d be doubting yourself like this, no matter what the date on the damned calendar says.”

“Thanks Ash, I really didn’t come in here to have a pity party. But thanks for making me feel better anyway” he smiled and took her hand in his for a minute. “It’s just hard, I guess, to see you guys with all your beautiful babies and the wonderful life you have and then when I sit on the train to go home I swear to God Luna looks at me like ‘Dude, what the fuck is wrong with you?’” he giggled and blushed a little bit.

“What is it with that judgmental look that dogs sometimes lay on you?!” she asked with her own giggle. “It’s soul-crushing. And they fucking see everything you do so you can’t hide from them...”

“No kidding” he laughed as quietly as he could so as not to disturb the sleeping infant on his chest.

“I love Luna” Ashlyn continued a couple of minutes later as she held Lily up to burp her. “But she’s wrong on this one. Sure, you and Nate don’t have any kids of your own, but that’s not the measuring stick for everybody. Maybe for Luna” she chuckled, “but not for everybody.”

They were quiet again as the keeper finished burping her baby girl and then leaned her up against her chest so she was facing her godfather and twin brother. Kyle reached over and played with Lily’s feet while she watched him intently. It was a sweet time and Ashlyn was happy to see that most of the worry had disappeared from Kyle’s face.

“You know you’re not going to grow old all alone, right?” the keeper asked her brother-in-law after a while.

“What? No, that’s why I got married” he giggled. “Nate has to stay with me even when I’m old.”

“No I mean these guys” she motioned at the twins. “And Josie and Drew. They’re always going to
be here for you. You’re their uncle and you’re always going to be a huge part of their lives. I don’t know if that’s part of what was bothering you or not” she lifted one of Lily’s tiny hands up and bent over to kiss it. “But this generation of Kriegers will always have your back. You’ve got my word on that.”
First of all, and most importantly, Happy Birthday Ali Krieger!! My muse is 33 today. On this day in my story Ali celebrated with the Breakers after a win Friday night, and then Ashlyn whisked her away Saturday morning for a long weekend in Bermuda. It was only a month before their wedding. Sigh...

Those first two weeks with the twins were indeed a blur. Ashlyn and Ali focused on taking care of the newborns while Deb and Kyle took care of Drew and Josie. Ken and Vicki and Whitney were frequent visitors who were always ready to lend a hand. The Friday of the second week was the Friday of Memorial Day weekend and Drew’s 4th birthday was on Saturday. Nate came up for the weekend and he and Kyle and Luna went to stay with the Kimballs in Ipswich again. Tammye and Carol flew up and took over Meg’s third-floor room for the weekend, with Tammye staying all the way through Josie’s birthday the third weekend in June. Carol, Kyle and Nate all went home after the long weekend, wishing they could have stayed longer.

Thursday that week was Tanner Wild’s graduation from Providence College and Ali had tried to get out of attending the early afternoon event. It wasn’t that she wasn’t excited for him or that she didn’t love him and want to be there for him. It’s just that she really wasn’t in any condition to go anywhere too public. It sounds dramatic, but waking up every three hours really does a number on a person, regardless of whether or not you actually gave birth to a baby recently or not. Doing it for two full weeks took a devastating toll. Ali and Ashlyn were barely keeping the babies on the same schedule, mostly just feeding them when they woke up and made any of the tell-tale ‘I’m hungry now mom’ motions with their faces or hands. Ashlyn couldn’t lift anything yet so Ali was involved in every single feeding. Much as she had done in the hospital, she woke up when her alarm went off, checked the baby chart where they tracked everything that went into Dodge and Lily as well as everything that came out of them. They also kept track of which breast had been nursed from last, or pumped from last. Then she would wake up Lily and bring her to Ashlyn, help her sit up and get all of her pillows ready and then spend the next few minutes taking care of Ashlyn’s needs – bringing her water, getting her something to eat, rubbing her sore whatever, getting ice for her sore nipples. Then she would go down and get a bottle warmed up for Dodge and bring him into their bed and feed him while Ashlyn breastfed Lily.

As painful and stressful as it had been when Dodge wouldn’t take to his mama’s breast, it was really a blessing in disguise. Now they could be fed at the same time by both moms. It probably only saved them 30 to 45 minutes at each feeding but that meant they could all go back to sleep 30 to 45 minutes sooner. Sometimes during the day Ashlyn fed Dodge his bottle, just because she loved to feed him and she wanted to keep that connection between them strong. Neither Ali nor Ashlyn cared who fed him as long as he kept growing and thriving. He ate like a pig once he finally figured it out and quickly made up the weight his sister had out-gained on him. When Lily was done breastfeeding Ashlyn would burp her and then burp Dodge when he was done with his bottle ten or fifteen minutes later. They were a well-oiled machine by the end of the second week, wordlessly handing one baby off for the other. While Ashlyn burped Dodge, Ali took Lily back to the nursery, changed her, loved her up for a few minutes and then put her back to bed. Then she came back and took Dodge and did the same thing, putting him back into his bassinette in their bedroom. The only difference was that
Ali often had to change his pajamas if he had spit up more than usual and gotten himself stinky.

Little Dodge was a ‘happy spitter’ just as his cousin Johnny Harris had been five years earlier. There wasn’t anything wrong with him. He just spit up after almost every bottle. If you were ready for it and had the burp cloth in the right position it wasn’t a big problem. But if he spit up a lot then he would need a change of clothes as would whomever had just been burping or holding him. The whole middle of the night feeding routine took place twice and lasted about an hour and fifteen minutes each time. So Ali and Ashlyn slept for an hour and forty-five minutes after each feeding, and then woke up and did it again. The brunette was on three months maternity leave or family leave or whatever her own employee manual called it, and she couldn’t imagine trying to get to work every day in her present condition.

Kyle was the one who put his foot down and insisted that his sister get her shit together and get cleaned up and get her butt in the car for the drive down to Rhode Island the next morning. He promised her that he would have her home to help Ashlyn with the overnight feedings and Ashlyn arranged for Whitney to come to the house for the day to help Deb and herself out.

“We’re leaving tomorrow at 10am, having the big family lunch with Tanner, then graduation starts at 2pm” Kyle explained for the fourth time in the past two days. “It’ll last an hour, maybe two, tops, and we’ll be home just after dinner. Piece of cake.”

The only problem with the plan was that they would hit early rush hour traffic on the way home as they left Providence and then also catch the end of rush hour traffic as they drove through Boston. Ken, Vicki, Koty and Brianna were staying over in Providence in large part to avoid that very problem. They also wanted to celebrate with Tanner and some of his friends and teammates for as long as they could.

Ali gave up her fight and let her big brother boss her around Thursday morning as he made sure she got showered and looked presentable. He had even gone out and gotten a graduation card for Ali and Ashlyn to give Tanner and reminded them to write a check before they left the house too. The upside to making the trek down there for Tanner’s big day was that Ali fell asleep almost as soon as Kyle backed down the driveway in her truck. She did the same thing on the long, traffic-filled ride home too and managed to get almost four hours of extra sleep that day. The sleeping also spared her nerves from having to endure her brother’s terrible driving.

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Drew’s birthday party was Saturday afternoon at the big old house, just as it had been the year before. In the morning Ali, Kyle and Nathan took Drew and Josie and met Sydney and Dom and their two sons at the Museum of Science so Drew could see the T-Rex for his birthday. It was a very nice outing and everybody had fun, especially the birthday boy. He was so excited to show Uncle Kyle one of his favorite things and Kyle couldn’t have been sweeter about it. Nobody talked about it, but they parked in the garage at the museum and paid the overpriced fee for both cars. If anybody had said anything Ali had been prepared to say it was because they had to make sure they got back up to Gloucester in time for the birthday party early that afternoon. But the truth was the brunette didn’t want to risk upsetting her son on his birthday. She didn’t know if he would remember the car accident if they made the same walk to the K-H office building again. But she wasn’t willing to risk it.

They rented a bounce house that you could hook your hose up to and have the slide at the side become a water slide. It was kind of overkill but both moms felt bad that they weren’t at their best for their son’s birthday that year and were overcompensating. They also felt bad that, as would happen to him for the rest of his childhood, most of Drew’s daycare friends were away or busy on the
holiday weekend and couldn’t come to his party. Even the Crosses were away this year. But the other usual suspects were there and this year, thank goodness, Josie didn’t bite anybody. Uncle Kyle was the hit of the party and he spent just as much time on the water slide as the kids did. Even the dogs got in on the act, although they weren’t supposed to. Fred was the first, brave pooch to take the slide down and the kids thought it was the funniest thing they had ever seen. Thankfully, Deb was able to make the #4 shaped birthday cake for her overtired daughter and made sure to put the coins and one button inside each piece of cake again. James Dwyer got the button this year and won the prize.

All things considered, it was a pretty good birthday for the brand new 4-year old kid. Ashlyn even made her first ‘public’ appearance and came downstairs for cake and ice cream. Ali held her breath when Drew saw his mama and ran up to give her a hug.

“Mama! Did you see my cake?” he asked excitedly as he wrapped his arms around her thighs and squeezed. “It’s a ‘4’, like me” he spoke very loudly and pointed at himself as he pulled her by the hand to show her the cake.

“We have got to get you two some sleep” Deb said quietly to her daughter as they stood side by side, getting ready to cut the cake, while the rest of the room loudly talked and watched. “When can we start bottle feeding Lily?”

“Wednesday” Ali replied with a sigh as she started passing pieces of cake down the table where Whitney and Julie Donaldson from next door made sure everybody had a piece. “We need her to have two good, full weeks of breastfeeding to avoid nipple confusion for her. Wednesday. And I’ve already talked to Ash about it. She knows it’s coming and she’s ready for it. We can’t skip more than one feeding though, we don’t want to risk messing up the milk supply.”

Ashlyn was breastfeeding Lily and pumping for Dodge’s bottles and, so far, the milk production was very good. Sometimes that didn’t happen, especially after a slow start like she had with the twins. To keep the milk supply good and strong, new mothers were encouraged to breastfeed or pump eight times a day, roughly every three hours. Bottle-feeding Lily wouldn’t solve the whole problem anyway. Ali still needed to get up with Ashlyn because the keeper wasn’t allowed to lift anything yet. She would go see Dr. Comello next week, when the twins were three-weeks old, so she could get cleared for some minor lifting and moving around after the doctor checked her incision and everything else. It wasn’t the big, 6-week post-partum check-up. It was the 3-week one that moms who had a c-section had to go to. But on Wednesday, as soon as Ashlyn finished pumping from one breast and nursing Lily from the other for the 10am feedings, she was going to take a glorious, uninterrupted 4-1/2 hour nap. She would wake up at 4pm, nipples ready for action. Then Ali would put the big kids to bed and nap through the 10pm feeding and Deb or Tammye would help Ashlyn with the babies so the brunette could get up for the two late-night feedings at 1am and 4am with her wife. They had enough hands on deck, they just needed to be smart about using them.

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They had made it past the first hurdle. Two weeks had come and gone and Lily could be bottle fed a couple of times a day to give Ashlyn a break and allow both she and Ali to nap. Deb and Tammye were there to help with Drew, Josie and the dogs and to keep the house running. It was the kind of help that was impossible to repay.

“Mom, I just, can’t even...” Ashlyn tried to tell her mother how much she appreciated all of her help those first three weeks of June.

“Oh honey just shush” Tammye smiled at her overwhelmed daughter.
They were in the master bedroom, Ashlyn felt like a captive sometimes because she spent so much
time in there, and Tammye had just finished burping Dodge after his 10am bottle. Ashlyn was in the
booster, nursing Lily as her mother sat facing her on the foot of the bed.

“I knew this was gonna be hard, it was hard at the beginning both other times, but this is just
something else” the keeper admitted as she rested her head against the back of the glider.

“Well, you’ve got two new babies” Tammye couldn’t help but chuckle. “So it’s twice as hard, at
least. But you’re doing just fine so try not to worry so much.”

“I don’t know how we could ever have done this without you and Deb and Kyle...”

“Ashlyn” Tammye’s voice was low and serious. “I’m so happy to be here with you and these
beautiful babies” she shook her head as she fought her emotions. “There’s no place else I’d rather be
and I’m so thankful that I’m able to help. You don’t know how good that feels, especially
after...well, not being there for you when you were little.”

The older woman looked down, relieved to have Dodge to pretend to look at as she tried hard not to
cry. She hadn’t planned on having this conversation with her daughter and she knew Ashlyn was
already overwhelmed with hormones and feelings and strange sensations and pains from her
recovering body. The last thing the keeper needed now was some heavy talk about what a derelict,
drunk, horrible mother she had as a child.

“Mom, you know that’s not what I think, or how I feel about any of that...”

“I know honey” Tammye sat up a little straighter and smiled brightly at the blonde. “I’m sorry I said
anything. You have enough on your mind right now.”

“No, really mom” Ashlyn lifted her head and met her mother’s gaze. “I hope you’re not here out of
guilt or some other...”

“I’m not” Tammye cut her off. “I can’t go back and change any of the mistakes I made, I know that,
and that’s not what I’m trying to do. It’s just hard to be here with these beautiful babies and not think
back to you and your brother.” She paused and looked down at her newest grandson again and
smiled. “He looks so much happier since he’s been eating better, don’t you think?”

She wasn’t trying to change the subject but both women were happy for the detour in conversation.
There was nothing new down the road they had just been on. Tammye carried immeasurable guilt
for being a drunk and part-time mother and Ashlyn had worked hard for years to be able to forgive
her for it. There was nothing left down that road and they both knew it.

“I think he’s going to have your father’s eyes” Tammye nodded at her grandson and then looked up
at her daughter. “It’s too early to be sure though. Chris’ started out like this, light blue, and just kept
getting darker and darker until they were brown like mine.”

“What about the dimple?” Ashlyn asked softly. “Ali’s desperate for a baby with a dimple like mine”
she giggled as she lifted Lily up to burp her.

“It’s definitely too soon to tell that either” Tammye chuckled. “But whatever gene controls that
dimple is a strong gene. Dominant? Is that what they call it?”

“Yeah, dominant” the keeper replied.

“I think Lily will have it for sure though” Tammye stood up and walked to the glider with Dodge in
her arms. She looked at her granddaughter’s face and smiled. “Both Johnny and Lizzy have it so the
odds are definitely in Ali’s favor.”

Tammye changed both babies and put them both in the crib in the nursery, whispering sweet things to them and kissing them both on their soft, almost-bald heads.

“Where is everybody else again?” Ashlyn asked as she walked slowly back to the bed after using the bathroom.

“Deb and Ali took the kids shopping” Tammye explained as she plumped up the pillows for her daughter and pulled the covers back so she could get into the bed. “Ali wanted to get Josie a new dress for her birthday party and Drew needs new sneakers, I think.”

“Yeah, he’s outgrown his old ones already” the keeper answered with a wince as she got into bed and got comfortable. “I can’t believe it. He’s growing like a weed.”

Tammye pulled the covers up and tucked her daughter in as if she was still a five-year old girl. She put her hand on top of Ashlyn’s head and bent down and kissed her forehead.

“It’s nice and quiet now. Why don’t you try and get a good nap in? I’ll feed the babies at 1pm and if I need help they’ll all be home for Josie’s nap anyway.”

“Thanks mom” Ashlyn smiled up at her mother and surprised the woman by grasping her hand as she turned to leave. They looked at each other for a minute, still holding hands, and Ashlyn’s voice was tight as she fought tears. “There just aren’t words to tell you how much I appreciate you being here...” she choked out.

“Oh honey” Tammye tilted her head a little to the side and started to get teared up as well. “Your Gram did this for me and now I get to do it for you” she explained and squeezed her girl’s hand. “And someday you’ll do it for your kids. That’s just how it works.”

Two days later they were in Dr. Comello’s office for Ashlyn’s 3-week post-partum appointment. Ashlyn had gained 46 pounds during her pregnancy and as soon as the twins were born she dropped about 11 pounds of actual baby weight and then 5 pounds of water weight. A few days later she had dropped another 10 pounds as her body got rid of all of the extra fluids it had stored up to take care of the babies. The keeper had been excited to lose over half of the weight she had gained in less than a week. She dropped another 6 pounds during the first two weeks but that’s where it all came to a slow, grinding halt. Ashlyn still looked like she was about 6-months pregnant. She hadn’t lost any weight in the week since then and complained to Patty about it as the doctor took notes in her tablet.

“I was doing so great there and now, nothing” she frowned.

“Listen, losing that much weight right after you give birth doesn’t normally happen” Patty explained and looked up at Ali when the brunette couldn’t help but chuckle. “As other women will gladly tell you” she glanced up at Ali and winked, “losing weight after you have a baby is frustrating and hard and sometimes doesn’t seem to make any logical sense.”

“Is it bad that I lost so much so fast?”

“No, no” the doctor answered quickly. “It’s because you had twins. We usually see a greater initial weight loss after the birth of twins. Not only are you losing 11 pounds of baby right away, whereas somebody like Ali only lost 6 or 7 pounds with each of her babies, but your body was producing twice as much fluid to take care of them. So most moms of twins experience a fluid dump, sounds sexy I know, right after they give birth and then their body starts to behave a little bit more like every
other singleton pregnancy body does.”

“Is that why her discharge has been so much heavier than mine was?” Ali asked and looked at her wife who had groaned and started to blush. “What? She knows we talk about this stuff” the brunette squeezed Ashlyn’s hand and smiled softly at her. “There’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“Says the woman who doesn’t want anybody in the world to know she poops” Ashlyn quipped and made the doctor laugh out loud and Ali blush deep red. The keeper flashed an apologetic look to her wife. “Sorry baby.”

“To answer your question Ali” Dr. Comello regained her composure and looked at the brunette as she spoke. “Yes, that’s exactly why she’s been bleeding and draining a lot more.”

“So I’m not going to be dropping 10 or 11 pounds ever again is what you’re telling me” Ashlyn sighed.

“No” Dr. Comello smiled and patted her patient’s knee. “But you were in very good shape and you took great care of yourself so I expect you’ll be able to get your body back to where you want it to be a little faster than most women. But don’t rush anything. For God’s sake, take your time and be good to your body for a while. It’s just done something amazing so let it rest.”

“Well she can’t do anything yet anyway, right?” Ali clarified.

“Exactly. Based on what I’ve seen today I’ll give you permission to pick up the babies but that’s it. Nothing else. Not even Josie. Babies only” Dr. Comello spoke clearly and looked directly at her patient. “And, obviously, one at a time.”

“Got it doc. Babies only” Ashlyn nodded and squeezed her wife’s hand. “I remember” she looked up at Ali and smiled. “I’ll enjoy the tiny amount of progress I’ve made and wait until my 6-week appointment for the all-clear.”

“Good” both Ali and Patty said at the same time, making all three of them laugh.

Dr. Comello reviewed some more test results and asked a few more questions. She commended the blonde on how good her incision looked and told her it was healing nicely. They reviewed a lot of things that both women already knew from Ali’s pregnancies, like the fact that Ashlyn could start to get her period again at any time. It usually didn’t happen while a woman was breastfeeding, but sometimes it did. They talked about how everything inside the keeper’s body was changing back to the way it had been before the pregnancy, but that things might be a little different from now on too.

“Like, will this varicose vein ever go away?” Ashlyn asked and lifted her right leg up.

“It should” Patty began optimistically. “Sometimes they don’t” she shrugged. “Typically, if it’s your first pregnancy, they go away. It takes several months, sometimes even up to a year though. My only request is that you wait at least a year before you decide to do anything like a permanent removal or anything like that.”

“God, I don’t want to do that” Ashlyn shuddered at the thought. “A lot of it’s hidden by my tattoo, but this top part really looks awful.”

The top end of the varicose vein extended up onto the lower section of her thigh. It was an ugly blight between the back of her knee and the bottom of her ‘Mary Sarah’ schooner tattoo.

“Try and be patient with it Ash” the doctor counseled and patted her knee again. “Same with the hemorrhoids. They should go away...”
“But sometimes they don’t” Ashlyn sighed and closed her eyes for a few seconds as Ali and Dr. Comello exchanged a quick look. The keeper took a couple of deep breaths. “I’m sorry” her voice was choked as she fought back against her emotions and the tears that had collected in the corners of her eyes. She took her free hand and pressed it against her incision to try and limit the pain she was about to cause it with her crying. Ali squeezed her hand and rubbed her thumb across the back of it. “I just...I’m so grateful the babies are healthy and I know nothing else matters but that, but...” she took a shallow breath as the tears started to fall. “I don’t know if I can deal with having hemorrhoids for the rest of my fucking life...and varicose veins...and a minivan...” she paused and took a couple of big, gulping breaths before opening her eyes again. She was embarrassed to be crying. She was embarrassed to care so much about these superficial things, although the hemorrhoids fucking killed and had a direct impact on her daily life. And she was tired. “I’m so sorry...”

“Aw honey” Ali said sadly as she brought her other hand over to brush some of her wife’s tears off of her face. “It’ll be ok, you’ll see. It’s only been three-weeks sweetheart...” she leaned down and kissed her wife’s forehead.

“I know it’s hard right now and everything is difficult and overwhelming, including the hormones your body is producing Ash.” Dr. Comello’s voice was kind and steady. “But you’re doing a great job, you really are. And Ali’s right. It’s so early in this part of the game. Give your body some more time and let it do its thing. Try and be patient and you might be surprised by what it can do.”

“Don’t be sorry, babe” the brunette spoke softly. “You feel what you’re feeling and don’t ever be sorry. It’s ok.”

“I know a lot of this is hormones and no sleep, but what if it’s not?” she asked, looking expectantly at the doctor. “What if I’m really losing it?”

Dr. Comello knew all about Ashlyn’s mild depression and her mild PTSD. She was her primary care physician as well as her ob/gyn so she knew everything that was going on with the strong keeper in her exam room.

“Ashlyn, I don’t believe for one minute that you’re losing it” she answered clearly, so there could be no doubt about what she said or meant. “The hormones that come into play during and after a pregnancy are hard to understand and deal with for every pregnant woman. Some are worse than others. I don’t think anything you’re feeling right now is anything other than your hormones messing with your brain.” She smiled at her patient and patted both knees with both hands. “But if you’re really worried then you might want to make an appointment with Dr...”

“Dr. Olsen” Ali supplied the name that Patty couldn’t come up with in that moment. “Mattie Olsen.”

“Right, sorry, Dr. Olsen. Meybe just having a good talk with her will make you feel better or make it a little easier to deal with everything going on in your life right now.”

“I’m so afraid I’m going to get post-partum depression” the blonde admitted quietly. “I read that moms of twins have a higher chance of getting it.”

“Do you feel depressed Ash?” Ali asked as she stroked her head gently. “It’s so hard to sort out some of the feelings when you’re exhausted all the time. At least that’s how it was for me last time.”

“What do you mean?” Ashlyn turned her head to look at her beautiful brunette. “Did you think you had PPD after Josie?”

“I was afraid I did” Ali admitted. “I read the same things you’ve probably read and a lot of the symptoms sounded just like how I felt. But I didn’t have it, that’s my point honey. I was exhausted
and cranky and moody and pissed off because I couldn’t breastfeed or hold my baby, but I didn’t have PPD.”

“When didn’t I know about this until now?” the keeper’s face looked hurt, not angry.

“Oh, well, you know” Ali blushed a little bit. “We weren’t talking that much at that time and by the time we got past a lot of that I had already talked to Mattie about it so there was no real reason to bring it up again.” She smiled lovingly down at her wife. “That’s all.”

They were all quiet for a minute and Patty made some notes in her tablet while Ashlyn settled down a little bit. The keeper pulled Ali’s hand to her lips and kissed it, then looked up at her wife standing right by her side.

“I don’t know what to think” she sighed. “But I guess that’s normal” she chuckled and Ali joined her. “Maybe I should just talk to Mattie, just in case. What do you think Al?”

“I think that’s a great idea” she gave her keeper a smile full of love and admiration. She was so proud of her for facing her fear head on and taking steps in advance to try and save her family any trouble or stress. “We can call her as soon as we’re done here. Ok?”

“Yeah, ok” Ashlyn returned the smile and felt a little bit better already.

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“I can’t believe you bitched about the minivan!” Whitney laughed again and smacked her best friend’s thigh, next to her on the bed.

“I know!” the keeper laughed and winced, clutching the pillow to her incision as tears of laughter rolled down her face.

It was later that same evening and Ashlyn was feeling much better. She had spoken over the phone with Mattie and the therapist had patiently listened and then reassured the keeper that she was not suffering from post-partum depression. It was her professional opinion that she was over-tired and experiencing a surge of different hormones that were causing her to feel temporarily overwhelmed. The therapist praised her patient for bringing the subject up in the first place at her doctor’s appointment. She also encouraged her to come in for an appointment whenever she felt up to it. When Ashlyn had told her wife the good news Ali had sighed with relief and then giggled about the minivan crack she had made at Dr. Comello’s office that morning. The keeper didn’t even remember saying it and wouldn’t believe Ali for several minutes. It wasn’t until the brunette repeated the whole line back to her a couple of times that she believed she had actually said it. Now, it was just after 7pm and Whitney had come up to visit after work. She helped with the big kids at dinner and was now sitting up in Ashlyn’s bed with her as they took care of the twins’ 7pm feeding. Ashlyn was in her usual spot, propped up against the headboard on her side of the bed, and Whitney was sitting right next to her, almost shoulder to shoulder so she could be close to both babies. The lawyer hated that she couldn’t be around as much but she was busy at work, setting up and staffing the legal department at Knight-Harris.

“Like, what did the poor minivan ever do to you anyway?” Whitney laughed again and her own tears of laughter hit her cheeks.

“The biggest three scourges on the face of the earth” Ashlyn said in a deep, news-anchor voice, “varicose veins, hemorrhoids and minivans...how will we ever survive?”

The two friends howled again and only pulled themselves together when Ashlyn’s nipple slipped out
of Lily’s mouth with a pop and then a frustrated cry from the little girl.

“Geez, watch it with that thing” Whitney teased as she watched the keeper reposition the baby and then help her find the nipple again. “Do you need a license to operate those or what?”

“Oh my God Whit” Ashlyn started, a little breathless still from all the laughing. “I don’t know whose body this is but it sure as hell ain’t mine anymore.” She giggled. “Seriously though, I don’t know how women do this and then come back to play professional soccer or tennis or whatever else.”

“Yeah, that’s always amazed me. And some do it at the USWNT level, like Christie Pearce and Amy Rodriguez and Morgan Brian” she shook her head. “It’s unbelievable.”

“Piercy and A-rod came back twice!” the keeper exclaimed. “I knew it was going to be hard on my body, I watched Ali do it twice so I knew what I was in for. But Jesus fucking Christ. If it’s not one thing it’s something else. There’s always something doing something that it didn’t used to do or wasn’t supposed to do or something like that. If it wasn’t freaking me out so much it would be pretty funny.”

“I know you’re probably tired of hearing it, but just give yourself some time Ash. You lugged these two nuggets around for nine months. Your body deserves at least that much time in return to try and get itself squared away, right?”

“You’re right, I know” Ashlyn nodded. “I’m just glad I can actually pick these guys up now, finally.” She caressed the back of Lily’s head and smiled down at her as she nursed. “Baby steps.”

The door from the second-floor hallway opened and then closed again as an exhausted Ali Krieger slumped onto the foot of the bed and then crawled up it, eyes barely open. She plopped face down onto her pillow with a groan and a sigh, draping her left arm over Whitney’s hips as she turned her head to the left, facing Whitney, so she could breathe. She mumbled something nobody could understand, patted Whitney’s hips twice and fell asleep, snoring lightly.

“Ummm…” Whitney looked at her best friend and quirked her eyebrow.

“Yeah, just leave her” Ashlyn spoke softly. “I’m pretty sure she thinks you’re me, but don’t worry, she’s harmless.”

“You guys doing ok?” the lawyer asked, keeping her voice low so she didn’t wake the brunette up.

“We’re good” the keeper smiled and yawned. “I think” she chuckled quietly. “It’s hard to tell when you’re so tired you barely even know your own name, forget about what day it is or even what time it is sometimes” she giggled. “We were both really stressed out when he wouldn’t eat” she nodded at her son enjoying his bottle in Whitney’s arms. “But after that got squared away the first week everything’s been good.”

“Good” Whitney nodded. “I’m glad. I don’t like it when you two are off. It’s like the universe goes on tilt or something and nothing feels right anywhere” she chuckled. “No pressure though” she laughed a little louder than she meant to.

“Geez, thanks” Ashlyn rolled her eyes and chuckled, elbowing her bestie in the ribs. “No, but really. She’s been incredible and I haven’t always been sunshine and rainbows to be around…”

“Get out” Whitney deadpanned and dropped her jaw.

“Let’s see how fucking charming you are after you carry twins around for nine months” she teased back.
They were both quiet for a few more minutes and then Whitney picked up a burp cloth and Dodge and put them both up on the top of her chest after he was finished with his bottle.

“How are you liking the new job?” the keeper asked the question she had been afraid to ask for two months.

“You don’t have to be nervous Ash” Whitney knew her friend so well it was scary sometimes. “I love it. I promised you I’d always be honest with you about it and I plan to keep that promise. I hope you’ll keep yours too.”

“I will. Always Whit.” They smiled at each other and then laughed when Dodge burped and pooped in one big, foul, bodily contraction. “Oh my God does that stink” she waved her free hand in front of her face, trying to move the air towards the lawyer.

“Come on, that’s not right” Whitney screwed her face up as the overpowering stench hit her. “Wow that’s some powerful shit” she tried to joke but actually gagged instead.

Ashlyn cracked up at the joke and the gagging and then tried to hush herself so she didn’t wake up Ali. Whitney regained her composure and tried to get up but the brunette increased the pressure on her hips with her arm and pulled her in tighter in her sleep.


“Come on, help me out. I wanna change his diaper, poor little guy” the lawyer whined quietly as she held the baby out in front of her.

Ashlyn tapped Ali’s hand a few times and even tried to pick it up but the brunette was holding tightly to the beltloop of Whitney’s shorts.

“Put him over near her face” the keeper finally suggested as she picked up Lily and started to burp her. “She can smell a stink a mile away. Hopefully she’ll let go of you. Maybe that’ll work” she shrugged her shoulders and chuckled.

Whitney’s eyes were watering from the powerful smell and she really wanted to get his diaper changed, for all their sakes. She turned to her left and held Dodge’s stinky bum right in front of Ali’s face for almost a full minute. She was just about to give up and wake the brunette up and quit messing around when Ali’s face contorted and she pulled her head back a couple of inches.

“God, what is that?” she asked, her eyes still closed and her voice raspy, sleepy and muffled by the pillow. She scrunched her nose up and then opened her eyes, squinting. “What the hell?”

Whitney moved the baby back out in front of her own body, waiting for Ali to release her from her lock-down.

“Honey, you need to let Whit get up so she can change the baby” Ashlyn said softly and sweetly to her sleepy wife.

The brunette blinked her eyes a couple of times and tried to focus.

“What is happening?” she asked groggily.

“You need to let go of Whit so she can get up” her wife repeated, still trying to coax a burp out of Lily.

Ali looked at her own arm and then looked at the body underneath it and followed it up until she was
looking at Whitney’s face.

“Hi” the lawyer said softly and smiled patiently.

Ali blushed and moved her arm back to her side.

“Oh my God, I’m sorry” she turned her red face back into the pillow to hide, mumbling something else as she did so.

“No worries” Whitney replied and patted her on the butt as she got up and walked to the foot of the bed on her knees. “It was good for me too Al” she winked at her best friend over her shoulder and got off of the bed with a chuckle.

Ashlyn’s laughter filled the room again as she watched her wife roll over onto her left side and pull the pillow on top of her head so she could go back to sleep. Nobody could see the smile on Ali’s face as she rejoiced in one of her favorite sounds. It had been far too long since she had heard her keeper laugh like that.

Chapter End Notes

Second of all, I'm still so sad about Ali's situation with the National Team. I'm not an idiot and I can see the writing on the wall. It will never make sense to me. Ali is getting the HAO treatment and probably being brought in to these camps as a strong veteran leader with a great attitude who can help show the kids the way. Fucking chaps my ass. At this point, I just want her to get her 100 caps. And I'm not even sure that will happen. I used to think it was funny when my friend said KO would get her 100th cap before Kriegy did. Well, I'm not laughing any more. It's actually going to happen. Anyway, sorry to rant. Still working on learning to cope and accept.
Chapter Notes

Well, what a great couple of days (yesterday and today) celebrating Ms. Krieger's birthday! From Ashlyn's post to Carm's sneak video to Marta's longer, eye-popping, booty-popping post...just wow. Two birthday dinners with two cakes/desserts? Lunch with Carm before she left Seattle. Looked like a birthday cupcake on the plane, sitting next to one of her besties - Pinoe. I loved seeing Ali so happy. Seriously, it gave me all the feels. So sweet. And, I can't help it, I have always suspected that Kween K does a killer twerk. I've mentioned it a couple of times in the story, lol. I'm just super happy for Ali today. I don't even care about the USWNT right now. Isn't that a blessing. Happy Birthday celebration still to come when she gets home to her love too. What could possibly be better than that? <3

The 2023 Women’s World Cup was being played over 5 weeks in and around Sydney, Australia that June and July. FoxSports was covering it and the stars of the USWNT were Rose Lavelle, Abby Smith, Lynn Williams, Andi Sullivan, Mallory Pugh and Crystal Dunn. Morgan Brian and Sammy Mewis were the co-captains and the grizzled old veterans of the team were Julie Ertz, Casey Short, Christen Press and Kelley O’Hara. It was a good group with an interesting mix of youth and experience and the team was expected to do very well in the tournament. Laura Harvey had been the new coach for the past two years and team chemistry was better than ever. Losing Laura Harvey from the NWSL was a tough blow, especially because she had been the only female head coach when the league started. The good news was that when Harvey left the NWSL two years ago there were already five other female head coaches who had taken up the mantle. Christie Pearce, Jill Loyden, Amy Rodriguez, Lori Chalupny and Shannon Boxx. Several other former players had joined the coaching ranks in colleges and universities and everyone was encouraged by the results both on and off the pitch. Finally, the best professional women’s soccer league in the world had more than one female head coach. The league was growing and the fan support remained high across the country.

Ashlyn Harris had covered the 2019 WWC and the 2020 Olympics and done a damned fine job on both tournaments. She had done lots of on-camera work for Lifetime TV, most recently at both of the 2022 NWSL Championship week games. She was charismatic and the camera loved her. The players liked and respected her and most of her media colleagues felt the same. The keeper knew her stuff and was usually very well prepared. She was honest and unafraid to give her opinion when asked about a topic. But she was fair and considerate at the same time. She often chastised her colleagues for making assumptions and generalizations, but did it without coming across as a bitch. Alexi Lalas wasn’t a huge fan, but even he had to respect the way she did her job and conducted herself while she was working. The most important group of people who liked Ashlyn Harris were the fans. She had her share of haters for one reason or another but most soccer fans admired her toughness and talent on the pitch and enjoyed watching her in the studio because she didn’t always toe the party line. She spoke from her heart and called it like she saw it. She never talked down to the fans or the audience and, because of that, they identified with her and saw her as one of their own. In short, she was in high demand any time a major soccer tournament took place. ESPN had already reached out to her about covering the UEFA Women’s EURO 2025 tournament in Germany and Ashlyn, and her agent, had signed on. Ali and Ashlyn were hoping to be able to work a little vacation into or around the tournament somehow.
FoxSports had been trying to get her to join their coverage team for the WWC in Australia for the better part of a year now. Ashlyn had always been hesitant to commit because she knew she would be giving birth sometime in June. She finally told them what the problem was and explained that she couldn’t commit to anything in the summer of 2023 except her twins. This wasn’t like when Drew was born and she could leave her wife and baby for a night here and there. She was a breastfeeding mom of twins this time and she wasn’t going anywhere. The keeper had been devastated when she first turned down the dream offer. She would have loved to spend a month in Australia covering the best Women’s tournament in the world. Both she and Ali regretted the timing of the pregnancy, but only for about a day. The fact that Ashlyn’s pregnancy had been so successful seemed almost like losing the WWC gig had been the payment for it. And they were both fine with that. The keeper hadn’t heard from FoxSports since March when they checked in with her one last time to make sure her answer was still no. She thanked them very politely and tried to get them to understand that she wouldn’t be changing her mind about leaving her babies that summer.

The tournament was scheduled to start on Saturday June 10th and the Championship game would be played on Sunday July 9th. The USWNT were scheduled to play three games in the Group stage and the first one was on Monday June 12th. Sydney was fourteen hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time which was going to present the same broadcasting problems that the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo had experienced. By the time people in the United States were ready to watch the games in prime time the results were already all over the internet and had been for twelve hours or so. Most of the games had been scheduled for an 8pm kick-off which translated to a 6am start time back here on the East Coast. The earlier, 5pm kick-off games translated to a painful, 3am start time back in Boston. FoxSports was going to cover the games live and then re-broadcast them later that night for everybody who couldn’t or didn’t want to get up in the wee hours to watch it live.

One week before the first US game Marcy Hopkins called Ali with an urgent message from FoxSports. It was two days before Ashlyn’s three-week post-partum appointment and both Ali and Ashlyn were still reeling from lack of sleep and the world-changing addition of their two new babies.

“Well what did they say Marce?” Ali was trying hard to keep the frustration out of her voice.

“He just said that he wanted to come and see you and Ashlyn tomorrow. At your house.”

“What the hell?” she paused and tried to focus her brain on what she was missing. “What am I missing here? Why doesn’t this make any sense to me Marcy?”

“It’s gotta be the World Cup, right? They’ve been trying to get Ash to do it for a year now and they just don’t seem to understand the word ‘no’.”

“Does he really think that she’s going to change her mind because he’s standing in front of her?”

“So what do you want me to do?” Marcy asked and then listened as her boss told her what the plan was.

The next morning Ali made sure that both she and Ashlyn got showered and were dressed presentably so they could receive their uninvited guest. They both did their hair and put make-up on and tried to stay as clean as possible until 11am when the FoxSports producer pulled up the driveway in the black town car. At least he was on time. Ali met him at the mudroom door and invited him into the living room where Ashlyn stood up carefully to shake his hand. He was a young, flashy, producer who smiled too much and spoke too loudly. He made a lot of small talk until Ashlyn finally interrupted him fifteen minutes in.

“Look Aaron, I really appreciate you coming all the way out here to see me but I haven’t changed my mind about coming to the studio for the World Cup” she spoke clearly but kindly. “If the timing
“was even maybe a month different I might reconsider but it’s barely been three weeks...”

“What if I told you we didn’t want you to come to the studio?” he smiled cautiously and leaned forward.

“Well, I’d be pretty confused as to why you were here if that were the case” Ashlyn chuckled and glanced quickly at her wife.

“Aaron” Ali spoke a bit more firmly. “If you have something to tell Ashlyn you should do it soon. You’re going to be overrun by two grandmas, two toddlers and two dogs in another thirty minutes or so. Unless the twins decide they need something from us in the meantime too.”

The young man swallowed hard and looked from one woman to the other, almost as if he were checking with Ashlyn about the veracity of the statement.

“Oh she’s not kidding” the keeper chuckled again.

“Ok, here’s the deal” he spoke faster now, with a purpose. “We want you to join the studio conversation for the pregame, halftime and postgame shows remotely. We’ll send a camera crew up here...” he looked around what he could see of the house, “somewhere.”

“Are you serious?” Ashlyn asked with eyebrows raised.

“We’re very serious” he replied with a nod of his head.

They spent the next half hour talking about the logistics of having a camera crew come up for the three Group stage games to start with. Those first three games were each four days apart. They gave Ashlyn the option of joining the live broadcasts that would take place at 6am or 3am, plus an hour earlier with the pregame show, or waiting until the rebroadcast during prime time later each night.

“I’d rather do the live shows” she replied. “I’ll be up anyway watching them and feeding the babies” she smiled.

They talked about the schedule for the first three games but then continued on throughout the entire tournament, optimistically hoping the USWNT would be playing in the full complement of seven games total. Just as they were finishing that part of the discussion, the cavalcade that Ali had promised marched into the mudroom. Deb stuck her head into the room and apologized.

“Mommy! Mommy! We saw a bunny!” Drew announced excitedly as he pushed past Grandma and jumped on the couch between his two mothers.

Persey, Fred and Josie all followed him into the room and Ali scooped up her daughter and hugging her on her lap. Fred went right over to inspect the visitor, promptly stuffing his nose right into Aaron’s crotch.

“Fred no” Ali corrected the caramel colored dog and snapped her fingers. “Sorry Aaron” she apologized.

“Drew” Ashlyn tilted her head at him as she chastised him. “You didn’t just push Grandma out of your way did you?”

“Ummm” the little boy looked over at Deb and then down at his lap. “Ah-huh” he nodded sadly.

“What do you say?”
“Sorry mama.”

“Don’t apologize to me. You go give Grandma a hug and tell her you’re sorry.”

The toddler jumped off the couch and ran over to Deb, still standing in the doorway to the living room.

“Sorry Gwandma” he said as he hugged her legs.

“Thank you honey” Deb patted his head and watched him run back to his spot on the couch. “I’m going to start getting lunch ready, ok?”

“Thanks Mom” Ali smiled. “We’re almost finished” she looked at Aaron. “Aren’t we?”

“Yes, just about” he smiled a little uncomfortably. The decibel level of the room had quadrupled as Drew told Ashlyn all about the bunny they had seen on their walk back from the park. “Your assistant mentioned that you had an office space here at the house...” he raised his voice so Ali could hear him. “Maybe I could take a look at that while I’m here?”

“Here we go sweetie” Tammye said to Josie as she entered the room now with some Neosporin and a bandaid. She sat on the couch next to Ali and tended to the little girl’s scraped knee. “What a good girl Josie” she kissed her little hand when she was finished and realized she had interrupted something. “I’m so sorry” she started but Ali spoke over her.

“What happened?” the brunette asked.

“Ouchie” Josie said and pointed at her knee as she patted Ali’s leg with her other hand. “Fall down.”

“She tripped while she was trying to keep up with speedy Gonzalez here” Tammye nodded at Drew on the other side of her. “She hopped right back up though” she beamed at the pretty girl.

“Thanks GiGi” Ali kissed the back of her daughter’s head. “You ok little one” she kissed her on the cheek and waited for some sort of answer.

“Ah-huh. Ok” she patted her mommy’s leg again and leaned back against her chest.

“That’s my big brave girl” Ali kissed her cheek again. “I’m going to go with Aaron to the garage for a few minutes” she explained as she tried to move Josie off her lap and to the couch.

“No. Mommy” she turned her little body around and clung to Ali’s chest.

“Ok, Aaron are you ready?” she stood up, holding Josie on her hip, and smiled at their visitor.

Ali gave the producer a tour of the garage loft which had been converted back into a fully functioning office earlier that year. She explained that it was fully powered and updated and that it had been the first home of their company for a while. He asked her questions about lighting and power and voltage and circuit breakers and all sorts of technical things that the brunette was happy to answer for him. She was glad she had paid attention when Jared had come out to get everything all hooked up for them again after the move.

“If you’d rather set up down here that’s fine with us. Totally your call” she said as they stood in the middle of the ground floor of the garage.

He had been taking a bunch of pictures and took a few more from there. They talked a little bit more about logistics and then he stuck his hand out.
“Thank you for joining the team” he smiled as they shook hands. “This space will work great. Everything’s going to be just great” he enthused.

“You’ll send the contracts to me this afternoon?” she asked as they walked back towards the house.

“Lunch is ready” Deb called out from the kitchen window when she saw them in the driveway.

Ali kissed her daughter’s forehead, whispered in her ear, and put her down on the ground with a pat on her bum. Tammye opened the mudroom door and called her granddaughter inside.

“Go ahead little one” Ali encouraged. “I’ll be there in a few minutes. Save me a seat ok?” she grinned as she watched her daughter waddle into the house. “I’m sorry for all the distractions Aaron” she apologized. “But this is why Ashlyn said no for so long. We’ve got a very busy summer going on here.”

“I can see that” he chuckled. “Your kids are really cute.”

“Thank you. But these are the easy ones these days. If you leave now you might just miss the twins altogether” she gave him a friendly smile. “You’re welcome to stay for lunch though. I don’t mean to chase you off...”

“Oh, no thank you. I’ve got to get back and get this all finalized. It’ll be insanely early on Monday morning before you know it” he laughed.

“Tell me about it” she grinned. “The contracts?”

“Oh, yes, sorry” he was typing into his phone. “I’ll send those over as soon as we get them drawn up this afternoon. One for the Group stage and another, separate one for the elimination round, quarterfinal, semifinal and, hopefully, championship game.”

“Sounds good Aaron. Thank you” she shook his hand again and was happy to see Ashlyn at the mudroom door.

Ali walked them over towards her wife so Ashlyn could shake his hand as well. They said their goodbyes and that was that. Ashlyn Harris was going to be part of the FoxSports broadcast team for the WWC 2023 after all. It wasn’t until after lunch, while Josie was napping, that they got to talk about it with their own mothers.

“It’s just too good of a deal to turn down” Ashlyn explained. “They’re going to come to me, here...that’s...”

“Unheard of” Ali finished for her and smiled proudly at her wife. “This just doesn’t happen. I’m not sure what’s going on exactly, but you’re even more popular than usual.”

“Do you think it’s the babies?” Tammye asked as they watched Deb and Drew working on a big, wooden puzzle on the living room floor.

“What about them?” Ashlyn asked.

“I mean, have they changed your image or something? Not that it needed changing...”

“No, I know what you mean Tam” Ali nodded her head thoughtfully. “You were popular before but maybe getting pregnant and having twins has broadened your popularity. It makes sense.”

“Well, that and the World Cup only comes around every four years” Deb chimed in. “You did so
well last time and they haven’t forgotten it.”

“I don’t know, I’m just flattered and humbled and grateful” the keeper shrugged her shoulders and rubbed her weary eyes with the heels of her palms, smearing her make-up and making everybody else laugh once she pulled her hands away. “What?”

“And tired” Tammye chuckled. “You just spread your make-up all over your beautiful face honey.”

“Oh, I forgot I had any on” she sighed and chuckled. “You don’t think they’ll like this look?” she pointed at her own face and did some Vogue poses, making everybody laugh harder. Even Drew had lifted his head up to watch his mama being silly and giggled. “What they don’t realize is that this is exactly what they’ll be getting when they put me on air at 5am for the pregame show.”

“What?” Deb’s eyes went wide.

“That’s for the games that start at 8pm” Ali made an eek face. “The 5pm games she’ll have to be ready for pregame at 3am.”

“How in the world are you going to do that?” Tammye looked truly alarmed.

“It’s ok mom” Ashlyn patted her mother’s leg next to hers on the couch. “If we can keep the twins on their schedule I’ll be up feeding Lily at 4am anyway. I can feed her, study up a few last-minute things, and then be ready to go at 5am.”

“Yeah, she can get all set up in the garage and everything and I’ll just bring Lily to her. It should work ok” Ali said confidently. “We’re up anyway” she shrugged.

“Yes, but you’re up in your pajamas and glasses and sleepy faces” Deb cautioned. “Are you sure you’ve thought this all out?”

“We have” Ashlyn replied with a nod. “It’s going to be hard and the timing is terrible. That’s my fault” she looked down sheepishly. “I didn’t want to wait to start trying to get pregnant. I thought we’d start trying in September and then maybe get pregnant in October or November. It usually takes a couple of tries, in our experience anyway.”

“But boom” Ali grinned and did an exploding fist bump to nobody in particular. “First try. My wife is good at fertility too” she giggled. “Who knew?”

“But we’ll make it work” the keeper met her wife’s gaze and they nodded at each other. “As long as you guys are ok helping us still?”

“We don’t need you to do anything extra, you know, more than everything you’re already doing now” Ali explained quickly, feeling guiltier with every word. “Hopefully you won’t even know they’re here or we’re out there.”

“Right” Ashlyn agreed and put her arm around her mother’s shoulders, careful not to put too much pressure on her incision. “This is all Ali and me and we’ll still be on twin duty too. We just need you to keep doing what you’re doing, if you can.”

“Of course, that’s not a problem girls” Deb smiled. “It’ll be exciting. I’d like to watch the games too.”

“And it’s only once every four days so it shouldn’t mess up too much of anybody’s schedule...”

“Stop trying to sell us on the idea” Tammye laughed as she interrupted her daughter. “I couldn’t be
“happier for you honey” she kissed Ashlyn on the cheek. “You deserve it.”

Exactly one week later Ali and Whitney stood side by side at the back of the garage and watched Ashlyn sit in one of the office chairs and talk into the FoxSports camera about how well the USWNT had played. They had won their first group stage game against Japan and looked good doing it. The keeper looked beautiful with her freshly trimmed fade, still blonde on top, and her beautiful, glowing face lighting up the garage. She still had a little bit of that pregnancy glow and the make-up artist who had arrived with the two-person camera crew complimented her on it. She had her work cut out for her trying to cover up the bags under Ashlyn’s eyes though. There had been a little bit of technical difficulty the first time the live broadcast in the studio had tried to go to Ashlyn, but they fixed it quickly and she was back for the next segment.

Ali could not get over how calm her wife seemed and sounded and looked. She and Whitney knew Ashlyn was about to throw up from her nerves but nobody else did. It had been a busy week as the blonde tried to spend every waking minute studying the teams in the tournament. Ali finally told her to just focus on Japan, England and Costa Rica, the other teams in the Group, to start with and that seemed to help Ashlyn focus a bit better. The night before the first game, the keeper confessed how afraid she was that she would make another mistake or freeze or blank on somebody’s name again like she had last time. Ada Hegerberg. She would remember that name for the rest of her life. Ali had held her and kissed her face softly as she reminded her that she earned a lot of new fans when she made that mistake.

“They knew you were real, just like them. It’s part of why they love you so much babe...you’re not perfect and you don’t pretend to be. You’re honest and sincere and they respond to you because of that.”

“I sure hope you’re right” Ashlyn had sighed. “I couldn’t even remember Persey’s name tonight. How the hell am I going to be able to pronounce any of those Japanese players’ names?”

But she did great. She flubbed a couple of names, but no more than anybody else did and she even stopped herself and corrected the name when she did mess one up. She was the only one who did that. The others just kept going and hoped that nobody would know they had said it wrong. As she stood there watching the woman she loved doing something she knew was special and important to her, Ali felt her heart swell. Yes, it had been a hard week as they practiced saying difficult Japanese names, and missing naps to watch and research soccer games. Yes it had been nauseating to wake up at 3am to get Ashlyn ready and feed the twins and remind the camera crew that it was the middle of the night and they had to be quiet and not wake the neighbors up. Nothing about doing this was easy. But both women knew that chances like this don’t come along very often. There was no way they could say no to this arrangement and neither of them wanted to. And just look at her go. Ali couldn’t keep the smile off of her face no matter how hard she tried. She and Whitney kept exchanging glances and grins and bumping each other’s shoulder as they stood and watched Ashlyn crush her third major tournament tv gig. The brunette really couldn’t believe that this was her life, or that the hot blonde on camera was her wife. God, she loved that woman.

At the beginning of the pregame show the in-studio host welcomed Ashlyn and they put the live feed from the garage up on a big screen behind the studio desk so everybody could see the keeper. She looked beautiful in a basic t-shirt style nursing top with a muted slate blue blazer over it. The greens and blues of the soft, small plaid pattern in her blazer made her hazel eyes dance and seem to change colors every time she turned her head or the light caught them just right. It had been difficult to find nursing tops that weren’t too frilly or feminine. When Ali finally found one online they bought a bunch of them in several different colors and a couple of different sizes. It became a staple of
Ashlyn’s wardrobe for the entire time she breastfed and pumped for her babies. The keeper’s look was completed by her diamond stud earrings and her latest, favorite white gold shark pendant that hung halfway down her chest. It added just the right amount of personality to the ensemble and couldn’t have been any more Ashlyn.

“We want to give a special thank you to Ashlyn for joining us at this ungodly hour of the morning” the host continued after introducing her.

“Thanks for having me” the keeper smiled into the camera with her dimple on display. “It’s nice to have some company for a change” she chuckled.

“Yes, I imagine it is” he laughed with her. “For those of you who don’t know, Ashlyn gave birth to her twins four weeks ago and has still found a way to join us for this incredible tournament. My wife tells me you must be some kind of magician or something” he laughed again as his colleagues at the desk chimed in similar sentiments.

Brandi Chastain was one of the soccer pundits at the desk and Aly Wagner and Abby Wambach were in Sydney calling the game from the booth and the sideline, respectively.

“Aly told me to tell you that you’re insane” Brandi teased and chuckled. “And she said to make sure you knew that was meant in the most loving way possible.”

“Well, she would know” Ashlyn laughed. “She had triplets, didn’t she?”

“That she did” Brandi nodded and smiled. “But seriously, kudos to you for finding a way to make this work. It’s impressive.”

“I have lots of help. Besides my wife, who is amazing with all of our kids, both of our mothers are here right now helping us out too. Mad props to the Grandmas!” she grinned and waved and blew them kisses. “Lots of help. That’s all the magic there is” she smiled and looked reflective for a few seconds. “But that’s all the magic you need.”

By the time the Women’s World Cup was completed a month later Ashlyn and Ali were about as wiped out as they had ever been. Ever. They had bitten off a lot and had some difficulty chewing it all. But, with the help of Deb, Tammye, Vicki, Sandi and Whitney, they made it through. They knew June was going to be a busy and exhausting month before they agreed to have the keeper participate in the WWC coverage. Ali had already told her brother that she wouldn’t be able to go to his 40th birthday bash in NYC. Kyle had been sweet about it and told her that she should stay home and take care of her wife and new babies that month. He agreed that was where she needed to be. So his feelings were more than a little hurt when he found out about the extra hectic schedule they made work so Ashlyn could cover the WWC. He had been angry at first but it had evolved into just plain old hurt feelings after about a week. The worst part was that Ali didn’t even seem to notice. She knew she was going to have to miss the party, but she didn’t realize how upset her brother was.

They managed to celebrate Josie’s 2nd birthday with a small party in the backyard, the day after Kyle’s big party in NYC. Josie and Kyle would be sharing birthday celebrations for years to come, sometimes it worked out great and other times not so much. The easy part was that they were both down for a princess themed party. That was almost too easy. Josie was a pink loving little 2-year old girl not unlike many other 2-year old girls everybody has known in their lives. She liked sparkly things and tiaras and her mommy’s pretty shoes. Neither of her mothers had pushed her in that direction, but Josie, so far anyway, had turned out to be a perfect little princess. A little later in the summer they were going to let her pick her own theme to re-decorate her bedroom when she
graduated to her big girl bed. They both knew it was going to look like a bottle of pepto bismol exploded in there when she was done. But if that's what she liked, then that’s what she liked.

The party had been small but fun and sweet. Deb had come through again, this time making the #2 shaped cake. Carol flew up for the weekend and then Tammye flew home with her on Monday. It was hard for her to leave after spending almost a month at the big old house, but she had a job she wanted to keep and her own life to get back to as well. Vicki stepped up to take Tammye’s place in the Grandma brigade. She didn’t sleep at the house but she came over every day, bringing Ken with her as much as his schedule would allow. Sometimes they took the big kids back to their pool in Ipswich for the day and Deb got a much-deserved break. And Whitney was always around if they needed her. She couldn’t come up during the day very often but she would visit after her work day was over and help out with dinner and hang out before driving back home in the evening. Sometimes she would sleep over if Ryan was out of town with the Cannons. Sandi Leroux was always happy to help too, but she was watching Sydney’s boys for a long weekend right after school got out for the coach in the middle of June. The Dwyers were celebrating their 7th wedding anniversary in Cancun and Sandi brought the boys to Gloucester to visit a few times while she had them. It was fun but even more chaotic. Once there are four kids, two more don’t seem like a lot to add, especially with so many grown-ups around.

And then, the last week of June, Ali and Ashlyn found themselves at Dr. Comello’s office for the keeper’s 6-week post-partum appointment. Neither mom could believe three weeks had gone by already. It didn’t feel like it could possibly have been more than a few days’ time. Everything that month was talked about and catalogued in terms of the soccer schedule. ‘Remember? It was just after the Japan game...’ or ‘No, that milk is from when I went shopping before Costa Rica...’. The USWNT had gone on to Draw in their second match of the group against England and then win their third match against Costa Rica. That had been a blow-out and had boosted the Americans’ confidence as they won their Group and got ready to move on. The 6-week post-partum appointment was after the big win against Nigeria but before the incredibly stressful Brazil game in the quarterfinals.

Dr. Comello reviewed all of Ashlyn’s test results, completed a pelvic, breast, and general exam, and carefully inspected the blonde’s incision. She went down her list of questions about discharge, cramps, bowel movements, urine output, caloric intake, breastmilk, nipple health, and general soreness around her incision and scar. All of Ashlyn’s answers indicated that she was well on the way to being fully recovered from the surgery as well as the pregnancy. She wasn’t all the way there yet, on either account, and Patty told her to take it easy with everything new she started to do. Ali listened to everything they discussed but in the back of her mind the fact that she and Ashlyn hadn’t talked about sex in the whole six weeks since the delivery kept pushing its’ way forward in her brain. It wasn’t unusual for them to have not discussed sex in the first three weeks after the babies were born. That’s how it had been both times before. Those first three weeks are just about survival and trying to keep you and your new baby clean and fed. But both of the previous times they’d been in this position, they had at least talked about sex and how much they missed it and each other. Ali had given Ashlyn at least one orgasm before her 6-week appointment after both of her pregnancies, even last time after Josie when everything had been so fucked up. The brunette could feel that uncomfortable dread rising up as her mind raced around what all of this could possibly mean. Honestly, if she took a step back and looked at the situation objectively, they were still in the survival mode. With twins and a crazy WWC schedule maybe that’s just how it was? Maybe sex didn’t exist again for another few weeks?

Ali knew that she was ready to bring that part of their lives back into existence. She was more attracted to her gorgeous keeper than ever. Something about her doing the most quintessentially maternal things really got to the brunette. It was like there were two Ashlyns and as Ali melded the two together in her mind and her heart she only became more irresistible to the brunette. Ever since
Ali had watched her keeper talk into the camera in the garage that first morning of the WWC she had been craving the blonde. That had been her on-switch and there didn’t seem to be any off-switch in sight. And there was something incredibly hot and sexy and confusing as fuck about Ashlyn’s huge, hard-working breasts. Ali felt ashamed when she got turned on watching her keeper nurse Lily. The breastpump was definitely not sexy. At all. But watching her breastfeed their baby girl made the brunette hot as fuck. Thankfully that hadn’t started happening until just last week. Seeing her in the garage had been the switch and then her breasts had started getting to her the following week. Then this week Ali had started noticing all of her curves again. Well, she had noticed them all along, but now she saw them and they made her wet with want. Everything about this was new and confusing for the brunette and she didn’t know what to do about any of it. Except to masturbate, which she had been doing for the past two weeks. She’d been sneaking away to Ashlyn’s studio every couple of days and making use of the new couch there. The last thing she wanted to do was pressure her wife into anything. She would just have to wait until Ashlyn was ready, and pray that it wasn’t too far away. But the fact that they hadn’t even talked about it once in six weeks was slightly alarming to her as she stood there trying not to think about it.

“Do you want a copy of these exercises too?” Dr. Comello asked her and brought her out of her thoughts. “I know she always liked to have her own copy” the doctor chuckled, “so I figured you’d want one too this time.”

“Oh, yes, please” she blushed a little bit and felt Ashlyn squeeze her hand and study the side of her face for a minute. “Thanks Patty. I’ll make sure she doesn’t overdo anything.”

“Well that’s what I was just saying” Dr. Comello tilted her head a little bit, in confusion. “You can’t really do that. We have to trust Ashlyn to listen to her body. She’s the only one who can really know when enough is enough.”

“Right, sorry” she shook her head and looked down, embarrassed.

“Everything ok baby?” Ashlyn asked, squeezing her hand again.

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I just...spaced out there for a minute” she fibbed and smiled apologetically at her wife on the exam table.

Ashlyn quirked her eyebrow at her as Dr. Comello kept going.

“So don’t do anything too strenuous. That goes for sex too. Work up to it and take it easy at first. I’d really like to see just a gradual increase over the next two weeks. I like a nice, full two months for c-section recovery if possible.” She made some more notes in her tablet. “Any other questions?”

The doctor looked from one woman to the next and, when they both shook their heads no, she got up, said a friendly goodbye, and left the exam room. Ali noticed that her wife had a funny look on her face as she quietly got dressed. A surprising awkwardness filled the room as Ali turned away to give her some privacy.

“I, um...I’m going to go check on the next appointment for the babies” she said quickly and left Ashlyn alone in the room.

As soon as Patty had said the word ‘sex’ Ashlyn’s mind had seized up. All of a sudden she was painfully aware that she hadn’t talked with her wife at all about sex since the twins had been born. The word just hadn’t come up at all, in any way, shape or form in six weeks. What the fuck? As she slowly got dressed she forced her mind to go back and remember better. That had to be a mistake. Ashlyn hadn’t gone more than a few days in her entire adult life without thinking about sex, especially since she had met Ali. She loved thinking about having sex with her wife, and used to do
it almost daily. Some simple, basic interaction with the brunette would automatically cause her mind to picture her in a similar situation or position but naked. And that, an image of naked Ali Krieger, always got her thinking about sex. Always. Even after Josie was born when things were awful between them, Ashlyn still thought about having sex with her beautiful brunette. So why had it not happened in six weeks this time? What was going on? Holy shit! A wave of panic rushed at her as she stepped into her shoes and ran a hand through her short hair. This was their 6-week appointment! This was when they were supposed to go to a hotel afterwards and have sex for the first time since before the babies were born. Ashlyn couldn’t breathe for a minute and really thought she was having a panic attack. She took a few deep breaths and went through one of the exercises that Mattie had taught her for her PTSD. After a couple of minutes she felt calmer and her head was clearer. Why was she panicking? Because she felt bad that she was letting Ali down by not having made plans for a hotel room. Because she felt guilty that she hadn’t thought about Ali’s needs once in six long weeks. Because she wasn’t sure she wanted to have sex yet. Because she wasn’t sure Ali was even attracted to her anymore. Her body had changed so much, in so many places and in so many ways. None of them kind. Fuck.

“Babe” Ali’s voice came sweetly into the room. “Are you ok?”

“Yeah, I’m good” she replied a little hoarsely. “I’m ready to go home.”
Let's Talk About Sex Baby

Chapter Notes

Let's get our girls back on track, shall we?

The truth was, neither one of them had thought about having sex that afternoon. Neither of them had made hotel reservations or babysitting arrangements or anything. There was no discreet overnight bag in the backseat. There were no smoldering looks or tantalizing touches as Ali helped her wife into the truck and then drove them home. That same awkwardness that had found them in the exam room filled the truck and Ashlyn leaned her head against the door and pretended to fall asleep. Both women were wracking their brains to try and figure out what they could do to fix whatever this problem was that had surprised them both today. The brunette drove for about 30 minutes of the 40-minute drive back to the big old house. She pulled off the highway an exit early and steered her truck another four miles towards the sea, to a little pull-off next to the ocean. She had discovered this spot years ago and it used to be one of her favorite places to bring her lunch and eat it when she was on the road selling windows and doors. She would sit with the windows rolled down and the sound of the ocean surrounding her. Unless it was low tide. Then the windows stayed up.

“Ash” she shook her wife’s shoulder gently, sorry to wake her up. “Can you wake up sweetheart?”

The keeper had actually fallen asleep, unable to keep her eyes open despite the worry in her heart.

“What?” she picked her head up and scrunched her face as she tried to get her eyes to open. She rubbed her face with both hands and yawned. “I’m awake. Sorry baby.”

Ali got out of the driver’s seat and climbed into the backseat. She rolled all of the windows down except for the one behind the driver’s seat because she was going to lean against that one. She grabbed the big beach blanket that she always kept in the truck and folded it up against the inside of the door so she could lean comfortably against it, with her legs stretched out along the width of the backseat. She was facing the ocean, her back to the truck door, and her right side against the back of the backseat. She reached forward and touched her wife’s shoulder again.

“Will you come sit with me for a few minutes?” her voice was nervous and shy and there was no way Ashlyn could ever refuse it.

The keeper got out of the truck and crawled into the backseat from the other side, grinning instinctively when she saw her beautiful brunette smiling at her and reaching for her. Ali had on a pair of faded jean cut-off shorts and an aqua tank top. She had taken off the long-sleeved button up she had worn inside the doctor’s office and her flip flop sandals were on the floor next to her. She didn’t have a tan yet. It was still only the end of June so she had a couple of months of summer left, but there just hadn’t been enough time to get to the beach yet. She looked young and carefree, like a college student on her way to the beach for the afternoon. Ashlyn paused at the sight of her wife and felt a bunch of different emotions hit her all at once. They ran the gamut and her face must have contorted with each one because Ali’s frowned back at her in response. Ashlyn got into position with her back to Ali’s front, careful not to torque her stomach too much and hurt her incision. The brunette wrapped her arms around her wife in the section above her incision but below her sore and sensitive breasts. She held her close but fought the urge to squeeze their bodies tightly together as she kissed the back of Ashlyn’s neck and breathed in her unmistakable scent.
“I love you so much honey” she mumbled against her neck and kissed it again. “So so much.”

“I love you too baby” Ashlyn replied as she put her hands underneath Ali’s legs on either side of her and squeezed them lightly. Her thumbs rubbed the soft skin on the side of each leg as she enjoyed the warmth and tickle of the brunette’s lips on her neck. “More than I could ever tell you...”

They sat like that for several minutes, just settling into each other and listening to the waves rolling in against the rocks that were twenty feet in front of them. It was almost 3pm and they could probably stay there until just before 4pm when they would need to be home to feed the babies. There was a light breeze blowing in off of the ocean that kept the bugs away and the sticky heat out of the 80 degree afternoon. It was comfortable in the truck, with, surprisingly, no hint of any awkwardness at all. Neither of them pretended to understand how that happened, but they both knew it had everything to do with the level of connection they felt. The more connected and in synch they were, the better every part of their lives was. The less connected they were the more things fell apart. But it was more than just the physical connection or the actual touch or contact between them. They had been sharing a bed and hugs and kisses and touches for 6 weeks. But none of it had been mindful. It was all done, lovingly, but in a stupor of exhaustion or stress or worry. They had been intimate, living together, sharing a bed and a bathroom and a life. But there hadn’t been any real intimacy between them. They saw each other clip their toenails and shave their legs and heard each other toot in bed. Ashlyn was still navigating her way through Ali’s drying bras as they hung in the bathroom and the brunette helped her wife apply the preparation-H to her hemorrhoids. They were intimate, for sure. But not in the most important way. They hadn’t talked about anything other than what the kids needed and what the house needed and what the dogs needed in 6 weeks. They were a fucking awesome team and they were doing a great job with those twins and the WWC and everything else. But they had become teammates and roommates instead of partners and wives and lovers. And it wasn’t just about sex. That was the pinnacle of the partnership and the marriage in terms of intimacy. There was a reason neither of them had thought about sex for weeks and it was because they hadn’t done any of the simpler things like talking to each other about what they were feeling and fearing. There hadn’t been any mindful contact or emotional connection. And there was no-one at fault for any of it. It was a natural outcome for the place they were in at that particular time of their lives. The only thing they had time for those 6 weeks was taking care of their family. That was it. And that was just as it was supposed to be. Nobody really expected anything more from either of them and that’s why things had gone as well as they had for those 6 weeks. But now, all of a sudden, it was 6 weeks later and they both remembered there was more to what they had together. There was more and they missed it. There was more and they wanted it.

“Ash, I...” she paused, her voice nervous again, “I want to talk to you about something but I want to make sure you know that everything’s ok and that we’re good and there’s nothing to get upset about. Ok?”

“Ok” Ashlyn’s voice was cautious and Ali felt her body tense up a bit in her arms.

The brunette brought her hands up to the tops of Ashlyn’s shoulders and started slowly massaging them. They were tense and tight and Ali felt bad because she couldn’t remember the last time she had given her wife a massage.

“Things have been so hectic with the twins and everything” she began bravely, focusing on rubbing her keeper’s shoulders so she didn’t get lost in her own words. “I didn’t really think much about your appointment today” she paused. “You know, about afterwards...” she sucked in a breath and held it, hoping Ashlyn would say something. “I guess I just got caught up in everything at the house and I...I, ummm... I never asked you how you were feeling about...getting a hotel room somewhere...”

Ashlyn’s whole body tensed up when she heard Ali’s awkward and sweet words. She took her
hands off of the brunette’s beautiful legs and rested them safely in her own lap as her jaw clenched and she swallowed hard.

“Yeah, that’s ok” she said quickly. “I understand. It’s ok that you didn’t want to...do that. I get it” she cleared her throat nervously. “Maybe it is still too soon.”

“Oh, ok” Ali tried to backpedal. “I don’t want to rush you...if you think it’s too soon...”

“No, I thought you...didn’t want to...because, you know, it’s too soon and my body’s not...” Ashlyn paused, unable to say the next few words that would reveal how self-conscious she was about her body those days.

“I don’t think it’s too soon” the brunette tried to clarify. “Not for me anyway...I just, wasn’t sure...if you were ready...”

“It’s not too soon for you?” Ashlyn turned her head to the side and tried to see her wife’s face but she couldn’t because Ali was leaning back so she could rub her shoulders.

“No” Ali blushed furiously, “not at all. But it’s ok if it is for you” she added quickly and squeezed too hard on her wife’s shoulders.

“Ow” the keeper winced under the painful pressure.

“Oh I’m sorry...fuck, babe, I’m so sorry. Jesus Christ” she muttered the last part and shook her head in frustration.

“It’s ok Al” Ashlyn reached up and put one of her hands on top of her wife’s and held it still.

“No, it’s really not” the brunette replied sharply. She was angry with herself and about to go off. “I’m a jerk because I forgot about today being the appointment where you get the green light for sex. I just forgot. I suck. I never talked to you about it. I never made a hotel reservation. I don’t have your present yet. I didn’t get anybody to babysit. I haven’t even shaved. I totally fucked it all up and now you...you...” she tried so hard not to cry but she couldn’t help it. Tears of frustration and regret started to travel down her cheeks as she dropped her hands to her sides and continued her rapid-fire rant. “Fucking hell. You probably think I don’t want to have sex with you and that’s completely not true but how would you know that? I’ve hardly even told you how beautiful you are or how sexy you look when you’re breastfeeding or how gorgeous you look with all your curves and...”

“You think I look sexy now?” Ashlyn’s voice was quiet but full of wonder at the thought. “Really?”

It took the brunette a minute to realize that her wife had replied to part of her diatribe. And then another minute to replay it in her mind so she could answer the question.

“Well, yeah” she replied, surprised that that was what her keeper chose to focus on. “Definitely. It’s been killing me not to touch you the last two weeks.”

“Al, please don’t just tell me what you think I want to hear...” Ashlyn’s voice was low and serious and she hunched over a little bit as if she was trying to get some separation between their two bodies.

“Ashlyn, you are sexy as hell and I’ve been sneaking up to your studio to get myself off because you make me so horny.”

“What?” she turned quickly to try and look at Ali’s face again and winced in pain when she pulled her incision too far. “Ow, fuck. Wait a minute.”
The keeper scooted forward away from her wife and moved Ali’s back leg up and over her head towards the front of the seat. Ashlyn turned her body a quarter turn to the left so she was sitting in the backseat like a normal person would and Ali put her legs down across her lap. Ashlyn scooted closer to her wife and held both of her hands in her lap.

“That’s better. I need to see your face...”

“I would never lie to you Ashlyn” Ali said slowly and evenly as their eyes met.

“No, I know, but I just...need to see you for this.”

“I love you so much babe and I totally understand if you’re not ready to have sex yet. It’s completely ok and I’ll never pressure you into doing anything before you’re ready. But I’m telling you right now, and I should have told you two weeks ago, I want you. I want to have sex with you. Please do not doubt that.”

The keeper studied her face and, as usual, found only love and honesty in it.

“I’m really glad to hear you say that” Ashlyn blushed and looked down at her lap. “Thank you for telling me. I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, ok?” she looked up at her wife with apprehensive eyes.

“Ok...”

“I honestly haven’t thought about sex once until Patty said the word in our appointment” she paused to try and get the courage to keep going with her confession, but the wounded look on Ali’s face was breaking her heart. “No, don’t take it like that...” she shook her head and started to get frustrated.

“Keep going so I know how to take it” she encouraged with a squeeze of her hand.

“Oh, yeah...um,” she grabbed the back of her neck with one hand and tried again. She kept her eyes on her lap and glanced up at her favorite face every once in a while, when she felt a little braver. “I forgot too, completely forgot, and I felt terrible honey. God, I just feel so bad that I haven’t even asked you once how you’re doing and if you needed my help with...anything. I just...I don’t know, it’s like the whole part of my brain that thinks about sex just shut down for 6 weeks. I don’t really know how to describe it...”

“I know what you mean Ash” Ali nodded reassuringly. “That’s what happens after you have a baby. It’s not just you. It’s everybody.”

“Oh yeah, she didn’t give us that speech today though, did she?”

“No, but I’m sure she figures we’ve done this twice already...”

“I know but, it’s so different now that I’m the one who had the babies” her eyes went wide as she lifted them to meet her favorite chocolate ones.

“I know!” Ali agreed enthusiastically. “I can’t believe how weird it feels to be on this side of things” she shook her head slowly and smiled. “I mean, I feel like an idiot that I didn’t think about this appointment before today. Especially since I’ve been drooling over you for two weeks. But that’s
just always something you did. It’s like...not that it’s a masculine / feminine thing, because you know
I think that’s bullshit – I mean, I proposed to you for God’s sake. But it’s like your role in our
relationship feels so foreign to me now that I’m trying to do it...for this pregnancy anyway. Does that
make any sense?”

“Yes” the keeper nodded. “I feel the same way. And I think we’ve done a good job figuring it out,
well, up until today” she chuckled.

They were quiet for a minute, enjoying the relief they were both feeling in that moment.

“I think I haven’t thought about sex at all because I don’t feel even a little bit sexy or attractive”
Ashlyn confessed in a quiet voice. “I’m sorry honey.”

“Ash, you don’t have anything to apologize for, first of all” Ali lifted her keeper’s hand to her lips
and kissed it. “And, secondly, it’s ok to feel whatever you’re feeling. It’s different for all of us.”

“Did you feel...like this?”

“I felt fat and unattractive and definitely not sexy” the brunette shared. “But I had this amazing wife
who was wonderful about telling me how beautiful I was and making sure I knew that she still
wanted me.” She reached over and caressed Ashlyn’s cheek. “I haven’t done that for you yet honey
and I’m really sorry. I’ve never had to worry about your self-confidence when it came to the
bedroom” she smiled shyly at her wife. “But I know how you feel and I should have done better. I’m
so sorry Ash” she kissed the blonde’s hands again, spending a few seconds on each knuckle and
letting her words and apology settle in. “But I’ll stop keeping all my naughty thoughts to myself
now, I promise” she giggled.

“Did I hear you say you’ve been masturbating on my new couch?” the keeper quirked an eyebrow at
her mortified wife.

“Um...maybe” Ali blushed deep red and dropped her eyes.

“How long has that been going on?”

“Just...ah, about two weeks. Once my only thought wasn’t about sleep, basically.”

“You know you don’t have to go anywhere but our bed to do that, right?” Ashlyn smiled softly,
almost shyly.

“Well I don’t want to wake you up...and there’s usually a baby in there next to the bed...”

“Oooh, yeah, definitely not sexy” Ashlyn chuckled. “And what did you say about watching me
breastfeed?”

“Oh my God, did I actually say that out loud?” Ali blushed even deeper red than before, if that was
even possible. “Nothing. Just...never mind.”

Ashlyn decided to let that one go for the time being. Her beautiful brunette had been so honest and
heartfelt and sweet about everything that she didn’t have the heart to make her suffer anymore. They
were quiet for a few more minutes, fingers entwined, enjoying the breeze and the view.

“But how did you know you were ready for sex?” the keeper finally asked.

“Well” she shrugged and blushed a little, “there’s two parts to that. The first is the want to. I
remember clear as a bell the first time my body finally felt normal enough again to respond to you.”
“What do you mean?”

“The first time I felt that tug inside when I saw you naked. My clit ached for you when you stepped into the bathtub to come and snuggle with me...”

“Is that the time you gave me an orgasm in the tub before your six-week appointment even happened?”

“Yeah” Ali ducked her head shyly and looked up at her wife with a smile. “Exactly. That’s when I knew I wanted to have sex. And then it took me, like, almost two more weeks to get my mind ready” she chuckled. “That’s the second part. And I still almost messed it up” she rolled her eyes as she remembered. “I was so self-conscious about my stomach and my boobs and I was terrified of what my poor vagina was going to do when I finally had an orgasm” she laughed softly and blushed again. “God that was stressful.”

“And I had no idea all of that was going on inside your head” Ashlyn smiled sadly as she remembered too. “Boy, do I get it now” she laughed. “I look in the mirror sometimes and I don’t even know who the hell I’m seeing in there.”

“Aww it’s still you honey” Ali leaned forward and kissed her lips softly. “Strong, beautiful, soft, sexy, wonderful you...” she pressed another kiss into her wife’s cheek and hummed into it. “And it gets better all the time, I promise. And one day you’ll look in that mirror and you’ll see your scar and maybe some stretch marks...”

“And maybe a varicose vein...” the keeper rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, maybe even a varicose vein” Ali continued with a proud smile. “But you’ll see you again, only better. Because you’ll know that you did the most miraculous thing the human body can ever do.”

“You’re amazing” Ashlyn whispered and pulled her wife into a hug.

“Me?” the brunette chuckled, hugging her back. “I’m the asshole who made a complete mess of today...”

“No,” the keeper’s voice shook with emotion, “you’re the woman who made me feel better about myself than I have in 6 whole weeks.”

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The USWNT beat Brazil two days later in another epic clash between the two teams, eliminating the Canarinhas in the quarterfinal round. Rose Lavelle continued to be the best player on the pitch and had put on a dazzling display. Her play earned her comparisons to both Marta and Tobin Heath and they were justly deserved. The quarterfinals were a veritable who’s who of Women’s soccer over the past two decades. Brazil v USA. France v Sweden. Germany v Canada. Australia v Norway. Every game was well-played and exciting, even the low-scoring affair between Sweden and France. The goalkeeping wasn’t what it had been back when Hope Solo, Nadine Angerer, Erin McLeod and Sarah Bouhaddi were playing so there were lots of goals scored. The two semi-final matches were Germany v Australia and USA v France. Four days after the USWNT defeated Brazil they bested France in the semi-final, the team who had beaten them in the championship game four years earlier at the 2019 WWC. After the game, Rose Lavelle did an interview with Abby Wambach where she asked the current USWNT star what had motivated them to beat France this time when they hadn’t been able to at the last WWC.

“When I was younger the Breakers were playing the NWSL championship game and we lost. It was
against Portland, in Portland, and there had been a questionable non-call” she rolled her eyes. “And we were crushed. We had mounted a pretty good comeback and we really thought we should have won that game.”

“You weren’t the only ones” Abby interjected, remembering the injustice of that game.

“Well, a lot of us younger players just wanted to get out of there, go to the locker room and start to try and forget how disappointed we were. But some of the veterans made sure we all stood there and watched every minute of their postgame celebration. I remember Ashlyn Harris telling us to remember every bit of that moment and to never forget how we felt watching the other team celebrate. She told us we had to learn how to channel those feelings and use them to help us the next time. It was some of the best advice I’ve ever gotten and some of us told that story to the team last night. Whether it made a difference tonight or not I don’t know. But I’d like to think it did” she grinned. “So thanks Keep!” she shouted into the camera and gave Ashlyn her favorite ‘hang loose’ shaka hand sign.

“Well how does that make you feel Ashlyn?” Brandi Chastain asked from the studio desk when the broadcast cut away from the pitch in Sydney a few seconds later.

The keeper’s image was up on the big monitor behind the studio desk and everyone could see Ashlyn was emotional.

“Wow” she began and tried to cover her feelings with a big smile. “That Rose, she’s a special player. It was wonderful playing with her for those five years in Boston” she nodded as she regained her composure. “I’m glad she was paying attention that day in Portland” she chuckled. “And I’m so proud of the way she’s become not only a star for this team, but a leader as well.”

It was one question from a simple interview and yet it was typical of the impact Ashlyn Harris had had on her teammates in the NWSL. That impact didn’t often get discussed on national tv after a huge USWNT win and those women, young and old, who had played with and been influenced by the keeper over the years were happy to see her get some recognition.

The other semi-final was a nail-biter that saw the home-team Matildas pull even in extra time, only to lose to Germany on penalty kicks. Nobody ever liked to see these games come down to pks. Nobody. The USWNT was pretty happy with the result, if they were being honest. They would rather play the German squad that had a tendency to play down to the level of their opponents rather than the Aussies who always seemed to elevate their play and pull out crazy goals at the last minute to steals the game. The other big story that came out of the elimination rounds of the WWC was the incredibly difficult stretch of games the USWNT had to play, particularly the last three games. Brazil, France and Germany were all in the top 5 and they had all beaten the US team in the past four or five years. They didn’t fear the USWNT and knew they could be beaten. It had been a very difficult road and the American team had impressed most of the women’s soccer world, regardless of the result of the championship game. The good news was that on Sunday, July 9th the USWNT squeaked out the narrowest of victories over the German women to win their fourth WWC. Christen Press, who so often seemed to be on the wrong end of things when it came to big games with the USWNT, scored the game-winner in the 88th minute. It was a beautiful, typical, goal from the top of the box where Press turned her defender, faked out the other centerback and then blasted a shot to the upper 90 that the keeper just couldn’t quite reach. It was magnificent. That fourth star was going to look good.

Ashlyn had been as good as ever with her commentary, observations and predictions. She had been the only one to correctly predict Nigeria making it into the first round of eliminations. The keeper had played with Francisca Ordega back in Washington and had learned a lot about the Nigerian national’s work ethic and desire to win. It only made sense to her that the rest of the team would
share similar traits. Ashlyn cemented herself as the go-to woman to talk about women’s soccer. Some even said she had a bright future in the men’s game as well. It was something Ashlyn was good at. It was something she loved doing. And the paycheck was considerable. It was kind of the perfect gig for the keeper and she was very excited about her future prospects.

FoxSports did a big thank you montage as the studio desk team brought the month-long coverage to a close. All of the on-air talent and crew and staff submitted a picture of the people they wanted to thank. There were over a hundred pictures from all of the people involved in the broadcast but Ashlyn’s had been an instant classic and fan favorite. She had the camera crew take the picture so everybody could get into it and they had taken it before Tammye left after Josie’s birthday. Everybody stood around Ashlyn as she sat in her official ‘broadcast chair’ in the first floor of the garage, even Fred and Persey. Deb held Lily, Tammye held Dodge, Drew sat on Ashlyn’s lap and Ali held Josie with the dogs right in front of the keeper. Ashlyn, with a little help from the camera crew, had edited the picture and written descriptive notes with arrows pointing at different members of her family. ‘Wonder Woman’ pointed at Ali. ‘Hi Mom!’ pointed at Tammye. ‘Actual Saint’ pointed at Deb. And above her own smiling head she had written ‘Luckiest Woman in the World’.

The picture that garnered even more attention though, was one of the ones that the producers had used in their ‘behind the scenes’ reel. It ran at the end of the show and then they also posted it on their website and released it on social media. There were a handful of pictures of Ashlyn being funny or silly or showing off one of Persey’s dog tricks during their down time. There were a couple of her holding both twins and posing. And then there was one that was just a beautiful photograph. The lighting was just right, it was in black and white, and it had caught Ashlyn as she breastfed Lily for her 7am feeding one morning, right after the halftime show had finished. Ashlyn was sitting in her chair watching the USWNT game and she was celebrating a US goal with her right fist straight up in the air above her head and a triumphant, fierce smile on her face. All the while she was tenderly cradling her 6-week old daughter to her breast with her left arm, tattooed sleeve on full display. There was no doubt what she was doing. You couldn’t see any of her breast or anything, but it was obvious there was an infant nursing from her left breast. The iconic photograph won awards and Ashlyn received a small check every time some magazine, breastfeeding manual, or college textbook reprinted it. The camera crew guy who had taken the picture got an even bigger check. In one picture, decades of preconceived notions about what a woman looked like and what a mother looked like, and what a breastfeeding mom looked like were all turned on their heads. Ashlyn was incredibly proud of that picture. And it would easily go down as the most popular photograph ever taken of the keeper for the rest of her life.

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The 4th of July was on a Tuesday that year and the Horribles parade was the Saturday before. Most people took off Monday the 3rd and made a nice, long four-day weekend out of it. Mike Christopher came up on Friday and settled into the condo in Manchester by the golf course he loved so much. Deb joined him, which was a big adjustment for everybody. She got up early every morning and was at the big old house for breakfast at 7am. Mike would come over for dinner most nights unless he had a work dinner obligation. Some days he would come over in the afternoon and hang out with Deb and the kids too. Sometimes Deb would go home with him right after dinner and other times she would stay until the kids were in bed at 8pm. She had told Ali that she could count on her every day through June and July but in August she was going to start spending more time with Mike and some of her other friends. The twins were sleeping for about 5 hours at night so things were starting to level out a little bit at the big old house. By the middle of August they would be three months old and sleeping for 6 hours at night, hopefully. There was light at the end of the tunnel for the little family and the moms both dreamed of getting back to an even more normal sleep schedule sometime in the Fall. But so far, both babies were eating well and growing well and doing well.
The big surprise for 4th of July weekend was the arrival of Mike Harris. He had flown up and called his daughter from the airport, not realizing how risky that was because her phone was almost always silenced so it didn’t wake up any sleeping babies. Ali happened to be walking through the bedroom and saw the phone light up on her wife’s nightstand. It was Saturday morning, the day of the Horribles parade, and Deb was with Mike getting their condo set up. There was nobody at the house but Ali and Ashlyn and their children and they weren’t sure who to ask to pick the elder Harris up. All of the Dwyers and Crosses and Flanagans were coming up for the cookout and the fireworks and maybe even some of the parade, but nobody had arrived yet. Finally Ali just decided to put Drew and Josie in the minivan and drive into Boston to get him. The minivan was a godsend for times like this. She popped a Blu-Ray in and the kids were happily watching one of their favorite shows as she made the 50-minute drive to the airport. By the time they got back to Gloucester two hours later everybody was happy again. Ashlyn had survived being alone with the twins for the first time ever and Ali had survived the stress of worrying about Ashlyn being home alone with the twins for the first time ever. And everyone was thrilled to have Papa there for a visit. He moved into the just-vacated guest room across from the nursery and stayed for two weeks. Ashlyn was so touched that he had made the trip, by himself, that she cried almost every time he spoke to her for the first few hours that day.

“Come on Bash” he teased her gently. “I came here to help out and spend time with my grandkids, not to make my grown daughter cry.”

After the group that had gone to the parade had returned to the big old house, had a refreshing dip in the ocean and then enjoyed a casual backyard cookout, it was well after 6pm. Ashlyn had stayed home with the babies, sad that she couldn’t go to the parade with her father and bigger kids. Ali went with them instead and Whitney stayed behind to help her best friend with the twins. Deb and Mike Christopher were there, as were Ken and Vicki Krieger. Koty and Brianna even came this year and really had a great time at the big old house. It was a great day to go to the parade because it wasn’t insufferably hot. The temperature was only in the high-70s and there was a nice breeze for most of the day. Usually the 4th of July holiday was blazing hot in the Boston area, but not this year. Even the younger kids were able to go to the parade and have fun without having to worry about being roasted by the sun and the heat. Ali had made a conscious decision to give her mom a well-deserved break over the holiday weekend so she was taking charge of Drew and Josie. Both she and Ashlyn knew there would be plenty of free hands around dying to spend some time with the babies so the keeper would have lots of help with her half of the children.

After dinner and baths and pajamas, everybody gathered out in the backyard on lounge chairs and beach chairs and blankets spread out on the grass. The fireworks would start at 9pm and Ashlyn didn’t have to worry about getting the twins up until their 10pm feeding so she was excited to enjoy the show, hopefully, with her wife and two eldest children. It was odd because they were orbiting around each other all day, except for Ali’s time at the parade, but Ashlyn missed the her like crazy that day. She would hear the brunette laugh from another room of the house when they were getting the food ready for the grill. She would hear Ali’s voice talking to Koty or laughing with Sydney or correcting one of the dogs or explaining what was inside a marshmallow to Drew and her heart just tugged. She would watch her wife move through the backyard making sure all the kids had a juice box or a sippy cup or whatever it was they were asking for and she felt butterflies in her stomach like it was 2015 again and she was fascinated by this beautiful new face in her world. When it was almost 9pm Ashlyn lowered herself carefully onto the blanket she had spread out for her little family and waited. Before too much longer, the train of freshly bathed children came through the gate, all dressed in their pajamas with big smiles on their beautiful, smiling faces. It was late and they should be in bed and they were excited for their special, late-night fireworks. Sydney led the way with Niki and Ali bringing up the rear.

“Papa!” Drew yelled excitedly when he saw Mike Harris sitting in a lawn chair and smiling at the
parade of children. It was as if Drew had just remembered that his Florida Grandfather was there. The little boy climbed up onto his lap and snuggled into the crook of his arm. “Fireworks start soon” he explained to his Papa and pointed at the dark sky.

Ashlyn smiled as she watched the adorable interaction. She would miss her boy on their blanket but she was so glad for her father. She knew he missed his Northern grandchildren and was painfully aware of the fact that he couldn’t afford to fly up nearly as often as Tammye and Carol could. A flash of red hair caught the keeper’s eye and she watched Josie run over to Ken, Vicki, Koty and Brianna. She stopped in front of them, trying to decide whose lap to sit on first. She chose Koty which surprised nobody. The joke that year was who had the bigger crush – Koty or Josie.

Everybody else got settled and Ashlyn watched Niki guide her brood over to Molly and their blanket. Little Penny’s long blonde hair was one big knotted mess and the keeper chuckled as she watched Molly shake her head at her wife. Before she knew it, everyone was in place and her phone said 8:58pm. But where was Ali? Ashlyn felt silly sitting all by herself on their blanket. Finally, she saw the yard lights go off and her beautiful brunette emerged from the side door of the garage where the light switch was. Ashlyn held her breath as she watched the love of her life make her way over to her side.

“Hi” the blonde said simply as Ali plopped down next to her on the blanket. She felt warm and smelled like baby shampoo and Josie’s special moisturizer as she kissed her keeper’s cheek. “I thought you got lost” Ashlyn teased with a smile.

The first firework exploded overhead and they both lay back as Ali giggled, her excitement too much to keep inside any longer. She put her head on Ashlyn’s shoulder and pulled her body up close to the keeper’s, always careful of her incision.

“Is this ok?” she breathed out as her eyes followed the first trails of red and blue lights through the sky.

Ashlyn put her arm around her wife and held her even tighter against her body, loving the feel of Ali’s arm across her chest. She really wanted her to put her leg across her hips too but was sure her shy brunette was just trying to be polite in front of their guests.

“Perfect” the keeper replied softly and kissed her wife’s head as she moved her hand slowly up and down Ali’s side.

The fireworks lasted about thirty minutes and the slow-burning sensation that Ashlyn felt inside her got stronger with every passing minute. The butterflies she had felt earlier and the yearning for her wife she had experienced during the day had slowly transformed into a low-level fire that smoldered in the pit of her stomach, and lower. It took the blonde a few minutes to recognize the feeling she was having. She had been reminded of sex three days earlier at her 6-week appointment. And she had opened the lines of communication with Ali later that same afternoon. Their connection had been re-established. The elephant was in the room. Ashlyn had thought she had felt her libido kick into gear a couple of times since then, but she wasn’t really sure. She was so fucking tired all the time and they were so busy with figuring out how to take care of four kids at once. It was hard to know what she was feeling, she had told herself. But this, tonight, this blaze that was growing hotter and more intense every time another firework lit up the night, this was the real thing. Ashlyn’s desire had sparked up earlier in the day and had been growing ever since she first felt those butterflies.

Suddenly the keeper was aware of every single place that her body touched Ali’s, and those places tingled as if they were actually on fire. She could feel Ali’s fingertips, hot, as they traced the neck of her t-shirt and caressed her collar bone. She could feel her strong thigh, burning, as it pressed up against the side of her own leg. The bare skin at Ali’s waist, between the top of her shorts and the
bottom of her shirt, felt like it was a thousand degrees as Ashlyn’s fingers rested there between caresses. The blonde’s whole body felt like it was going to burst into flames and she wondered if her gorgeous wife could feel her heart pounding in her chest. She wondered if Ali could feel the heat too. Just barely audible above the din of the blood rushing in her ears, Ashlyn could hear her friends and family oohing and aahhing at the beautiful fireworks display above them. She had forgotten they were even there. Fuck did she wish she was alone with her wife right at that moment. She would have traded almost anything to make it so. The keeper didn’t know if her insides were ready to have sex or not. But for the first time, she didn’t care. For the first time her want and her lust over-rode any other fear or doubt or hesitation that her brain could conjure up. Ashlyn didn’t care about uterine cramps or discharge or vaginal dryness or leaking nipples. All she cared about was having sex with her wife, being intimate with the woman she loved, connecting with the love of her life as only the two of them could. Fuck. She closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths to calm herself. She was wet between her legs as well as inside her nursing bra. Her hormones were with her, that was for sure. Just as she opened her eyes she became aware of Ali’s intense stare. Ashlyn turned her head to look at her wife and moaned out loud when she saw the dark, lidded eyes staring back at her.

Ali had leaned her head back so she could watch her wife’s face as she struggled with her newly rediscovered desire. She had been watching Ashlyn for several minutes, totally unbeknownst to the blonde. Ali’s own lust was rising as she felt Ashlyn’s body become electrified right underneath and next to her. The moan her keeper let loose made her own panties wet and it took every ounce of self-control she had not to mount Ashlyn right there in front of everybody. Instead, she reached up with her hand and pulled her wife’s face down towards her. She brought their lips together in a soft, simple kiss, tenderly moving her thumb across Ashlyn’s lips as they pulled apart. She moved her mouth as close as she could to her keeper’s ear and whispered, her hot breath making Ashlyn shudder.

“I want you too.”
My Kind of Fireworks

Chapter Notes

What can I say? I'm still riding the high from Ali's birthday on Friday. I shouldn't post this chapter because now you guys are caught up with me and this part has just a couple of chapters left. I won't let too much time go between the last few chapters but they probably won't be everyday anymore. I think maybe two or three more to go. We'll finish this part up at Christmastime. Thanks, as always, for reading!

Smut warning

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It felt like it took forever for Ashlyn and Ali to finally be alone in their bedroom that night. The Dwyers were staying over, just as they had done last year after the Horribles and Fireworks. Dom and Sydney were up on the third floor in Meg's room, also known as the extra guest room, and they had James with them in the portable crib. Cash was sleeping on the twin bed in Drew's room and they had taken forever to settle down, even though both boys were completely wiped out from their busy day and late night. Papa finally had to go in and remind them, very seriously, that if they didn't go to sleep right away they wouldn't be able to go to the beach with him the next morning. And he had promised to show them both how he had taught Ashlyn how to surf when she was a little girl. And poor Josie with her impossibly fair skin had gotten a sunburn even though Ali had slathered her with sunscreen four or five different times that day. That kid was such a trooper though. She barely complained until it was time to go to bed and then the scorched skin on her shoulders started to bother her. Ashlyn had gone in and tried to soothe her while Ali was trying to wrangle the boys and make sure the Dwyers had everything they needed. The keeper finally got Josie to sleep by bringing in a fan and pointing just enough of it on her so that the air moved across her skin and made it feel better but it wasn't blowing on her directly.

It was almost 11:30pm when Ali finally closed the bedroom door behind her and stopped at her dresser to change into her pajamas. She moved as quietly as possible so she didn't wake up her wife or whichever baby was sleeping in the bassinet next to her side of the bed. The brunette nearly had a heart attack when she walked past the foot of the bed on her way to the master bathroom. Ashlyn was sitting up in the chair to the dressing table, in her pajamas, losing a battle with herself to stay awake. Once her heart started beating at a more regular rate, Ali felt it swell at the sight of her sweet keeper. She stood behind her wife and hugged her as she kissed her cheek softly.

"Honey, why don't you get into bed" she said quietly, not wanting to wake the baby. "It's late and you must be exhausted."

"I'm awake" she forced her eyes open and leaned forward in the chair. "I'm awake."

"Come on babe, just get into bed..." the brunette pulled her by her arms until she got up out of the chair and into their bed.

Ashlyn wouldn't let go of Ali's arms though.

"I waited up for you" she smirked, sleepily. "Come to bed baby" she wagged her eyebrows.
“It’s so late Ash” Ali smiled and tilted her head. “Are you sure tonight’s the night?”

“I am so sure” she nodded, now fully awake. “Unless...unless you don’t want to” her face fell even though she tried hard not to show her disappointment at that possibility.

“Oh no” Ali shook her head and grinned seductively at her wife. “I meant what I said during the fireworks, sexy” she bit her bottom lip and let Ashlyn pull her closer by her hips so she was standing right up against the bed by her keeper.

Ashlyn felt their heat rise again and ran her hands up Ali’s sides, brushing the sides of her breasts with her thumbs and making her moan. It was as if someone had turned up the burner on the stove from simmer to high, just like that. She leaned over and put her hot mouth on the brunette’s breast, still beneath her sleep tank, and blew warm air through the thin material.

“Jesus...” Ali exhaled and closed her eyes as she felt her body start to completely give in to her keeper’s touch. Just before it did her brain kicked in with one last message. “Let me bring the baby into the nursery and lock the door” she reluctantly pulled back with the last bit of willpower she had.

“Both babies are already in the nursery” Ashlyn whined at the loss of contact as Ali moved to the bedroom door to the second-floor hall and locked it.

The blonde got up and locked the door to the backstairs and then went to the bathroom to pee.

“Oh good” Ali said quickly as she hurried into the bathroom behind her wife. “I just want to take my contacts out real quick, my eyes are killing me. Is that ok?”

“Baby, finish getting ready for bed” the keeper replied as she sat on the toilet. “You haven’t washed your face yet either have you?”

“No...but I’ll go fast, I promise.”

Five minutes later, after taking her contacts out and brushing her teeth, Ali was bent over the sink washing her face when she felt her wife standing behind her, with her long fingers caressing her ass and thighs and back. Ashlyn didn’t say a word, she just slowly pushed the brunette’s shirt up around her ribs, bent over and placed hot, open-mouthed kisses down the lower half of her spine while her hands kept roaming over her ass and thighs. Ali had to concentrate with all her might on her task so she didn’t get soap in her eyes and end up taking even longer at the sink. She started to rinse off her face as she felt her keeper pulling her pajama pants down over her hips and thighs. Fuck. Hurry the fuck up with your damned face! She couldn’t help but moan when she felt Ashlyn’s fingers ghost past her entrance, just barely touching her most sensitive flesh, and then retreating to her ass again. Ashlyn got on her knees and moved those open-mouthed kisses down over the most beautiful ass-cheeks in the world. Her hands went, gently, to Ali’s hips and then traveled down the sides of her thighs, dragging the pajama pants all the way to the floor. She tapped Ali’s left leg and the brunette lifted her feet, one at a time, while the keeper pulled them all the way off. Ashlyn loved it when Ali’s skin broke into goosebumps and she grinned into the kiss she was placing low on her nice, round ass. She brought both hands up and grabbed the brunette’s ass, roughly massaging it and making Ali spread her legs out farther to keep her balance.

“Ashlyn” her voice was low and throaty. “Fuck...”

The keeper heard the water shut off and the towel ring squeak as Ali pulled it to her face with another moan. She was about to get up off of her knees and lead her wife back into the bedroom, but then Ali leaned back and stuck her ass up in the air, exposing more of her pussy and spreading her legs out even farther. Far be it from Ashlyn to refuse an invitation like that.
“You smell so fucking good baby” she purred as she licked the tops of her thighs and ran her hand through Ali’s dripping folds.

“Oh God...” Ali got so excited and turned on at the touch that she thought she was going to pass out. It had been so long since her keeper had touched her and she wasn’t sure she was going to last more than ten minutes at the rate they were going. “Yessss...fuck...” she moaned.

“Do you want to go get in bed?” the blonde asked, taking her time and spacing the words out between gentle bites to Ali’s ass and strokes up and down along her soaked entrance. She knew her wife didn’t like to rely on her own legs to hold her up when she came.

“Shit” Ali closed her eyes and banged her head softly on the cool surface of the vanity. “Just...don’t stop touching me babe...please, don’t stop.”

The hunger in her voice made Ashlyn’s own core twitch in response and the keeper couldn’t wait another minute to feel Ali’s walls around her fingers. She pushed two fingers inside her wife’s core and groaned out loud at the warm, slick sensation. The brunette moaned loudly too, finally getting those long, strong fingers right where she wanted them. They both heard Mike Harris cough from the Guest room on the other side of the bathroom wall, behind the big mirror on the wall.

“Goddamnit...” Ashlyn bitched as she pulled her fingers back out of her beautiful brunette who had stood up at the sound of her father-in-law so close. “Come here baby” she tugged on Ali’s arm and led her to their bed, closing the bathroom door as they left.

“Talk about a fucking buzzkill” Ali chuckled and tried to get her mind back to where it was a few minutes earlier.

“Don’t even think about it. Just lie down and relax” the keeper licked her lips as she watched the brunette climb onto the bed, tugging her sleep tank off and tossing it at Ashlyn’s face.

“Are you doing ok honey?” Ali asked as she spread her legs out wide and ran her hands lazily across her own breasts, stomach, thighs and then short hairs.

“I’m good, well, I will be as soon as I can taste you...”

“Well, what are you waiting for? Come and fuck me with that hot tongue of yours, sexy.”

Ashlyn put a pillow under her stomach as she lay down on it between her wife’s toned legs. Ali bent both legs up at the knees and played with her own pussy lips until her keeper pushed her hands out of the way. She wasted no time and pressed her whole face into Ali’s wet center, humming and tilting her head back and forth as she did so.

“Mmmmmmmmmmmmm...” she moaned as she tasted Ali’s sweet juices and felt her strong hand at the back of her head. “So fucking good...Mmmmmmmmm...”

“Fuck, babe...oh that’s so nice...please don’t stop...” the brunette purred as she grabbed her own breast with one hand and scratched at the back of Ashlyn’s head with the other.

There were no candles or rose petals or sexy music. There had been no date night or even a simple, sexy make-out session beforehand. Neither of them had taken the time to make sure their bodies were perfectly groomed or their nails expertly trimmed. But here they were, hot and bothered and desperate for each other for the first time since before the babies were born. If you included Ashlyn’s week of bedrest it had been 7-1/2 weeks since they had last touched and tasted each other like this. They both wished they were someplace more private, like an anonymous hotel room. But they couldn’t wait. Ali recognized the look in her keeper’s eye as soon as she saw it and knew suggesting
that they wait and make it special would not go over well. Honestly, she didn’t want to wait either. Not one minute longer. So they had sex and tried to be quiet. They really wanted to just rip each other’s clothes off and go a little wild but Ashlyn’s body wasn’t ready for that. As much as they wanted to and as worked up as they both were, they knew they had to take it easy and stay in control.

“God I’ve missed this” Ashlyn mumbled out around inner lips and then sucked hard on them again. Ali arched her back and pinched her own nipple as her keeper kept sucking all along her pussy. The brunette squealed a little bit when her keeper finally brought her lips up to her clit and sucked that into her mouth too. Ashlyn reached her right hand around Ali’s thigh and trailed her fingers across her hip and stomach, causing goosebumps to appear. She heard her wife gasp when she finally dragged her fingertips across her tattoo-covered sweet spot, tracing the shape of the wave from memory.

“Oh God, yes...yes Ash...” she groaned out when she felt the blonde push two long fingers back inside her throbbing center. The touch on the tattoo, the strong pressure on her clit and those incredible fingers pumping inside her pussy took Ali all the way up to the top of the mountain in record time. All she needed was a final push to get her to the other side. “Unnnhhhh...Jesus...Unnnnnhhhhhh...” she moaned and writhed and bounced as Ashlyn brought her home with another minute or two of hard thrusting and firm flicking of her tongue. “Yessss...fuck...oh, oh my God...Yessssssssssssssssss...” she hissed out as she came hard, kicked her right leg out straight and crunched her abs, practically sitting up as all her muscles constricted.

Ashlyn wanted to hold her and help her ride it out but she just couldn’t. She kissed the inside of Ali’s thick thigh and then rolled over onto her back, out of the way, so she was almost parallel with the foot of the bed. She had to get off of her stomach. Even with the pillow her incision was killing her. And her fucking breasts had never been so sore in her life. All of the thrusting had been really painful as her large breasts had knocked against each other and the supportive nursing bra that still housed them. Thankfully, Ali’s orgasm had arrived pretty quickly. Ashlyn wasn’t really sure how much longer she would have been able to keep doing that. Oh but it had been so worth it. She sighed happily as she lay there trying to catch her breath, one hand across her incision and the other arm across her chest, holding her breasts still. To taste and smell and feel her wife’s gorgeous body like that again was more than worth some pain that would pass soon enough.

Ali felt the hot tears running down her cheeks and tried to get them to stop. They were her occasional post-orgasm happy tears but she didn’t want Ashlyn to have to worry about anything in that moment. What a release that had been. It had felt absolutely incredible to have her wife’s hands and mouth take her on that ride again. Fucking awesome. After a couple of minutes the brunette wiped the tears off of her smiling face and sat up so she could see her gorgeous keeper. She frowned and then fought the chuckle she felt rising in her throat as she looked at her sweet wife. She still had her sleep shorts on, and, Ali knew, the grandma panties she had been wearing underneath them. Her t-shirt was gone and the brunette could see the black nursing bra that was her favorite, valiantly trying to support her two very large breasts. Ali moved down until she was lying on her stomach next to her keeper, propped up on her elbows.

“Are you ok honey?” she asked as she kissed Ashlyn’s cheek sweetly.

“Yeah, just a little sore” she replied in a breathy voice. “But it’ll pass” she smiled at the kisses and licks her face was getting from the brunette.

“Mmmmm, I’ve just got to get you cleaned up a little bit” Ali chuckled sexily. “Your face is a real mess babe...”
“Can’t imagine how that happened” Ashlyn replied with a grin and then turned her head so Ali’s lips met hers. They kissed for a long minute, both enjoying how close they felt. “Thank you Al.”

“Thank me?” the brunette chuckled again and wiped the rest of her wife’s face off with her hand. “Thank you for that amazing orgasm. Damn that was good.”

“You’re welcome” she kissed her beautiful brunette’s lips again. “But thank you for not making me stop or slow down or do it just so.” She looked into her favorite whiskey colored eyes above her. “Thank you for just letting me do it.”

“Believe me” Ali giggled. “The pleasure was all mine.”

The brunette took her time and caressed Ashlyn’s shoulders and arms and hands, kissing them and touching them softly with her fingers. She wanted to give her wife a few minutes to recover from the exertion, but not wait too long or exhaustion would start to set in.

“How are your girls doing” she smiled as she gently ghosted her hand underneath the breast closest to her.

“Sore as hell” she chuckled. “I can’t believe you did that without a bra on the first time, after Drew” she looked at her wife in awe.

“Did I?” Ali laughed softly and kissed the blonde’s stomach in the safe area. “I don’t think it lasted long. I seem to remember you bringing me my bra and helping me into it” she chuckled and kissed the soft skin near her wife’s belly button some more.

“That’s right” Ashlyn nodded. “I remember that too. But you totally took care of me without one first and I can’t even imagine doing that right now” she shook her head. “You’re something else baby” she smiled adoringly at her wife.

“Well, remember, your boobs are bigger than mine were too. You’ve got a milk supply for two babies instead of just one.”

“Good point” the keeper nodded, enjoying the way Ali’s lips and tongue were working lower, over near her hips now.

“Are you ready?” Ali asked and turned her head to watch her wife’s face as she replied.

“I am. I’m nervous” she admitted quietly. “But that’s not going to go away until we do it” she shrugged. “I’m ready.”

The brunette was back up by her face again, hovering above her on her elbows. She gave Ashlyn a long, deep kiss, licking her lips and exploring with her tongue, that left them both a little breathless.

“I love you” she whispered near her keeper’s ear and nibbled on her earlobe. “And I’m gonna make you feel so good” she moved her lips to Ashlyn’s neck. “So just relax and don’t worry about anything, ok?” she purred and licked the skin near her pulse point before sucking on it. “I promise you nothing it does will surprise me or gross me out. So don’t even think about it.” She brought her lips back up and gave her wife another slow, passionate kiss, tugging on her bottom lip when they finally pulled apart. “Just try not to think about anything at all except how good you feel.”

Ashlyn thought back to their first time after Drew was born and remembered Ali admitting all the things that had been racing through her brain as she tried to have sex that afternoon in the hotel near
the doctor’s office. The brunette hadn’t told her about it until they were driving home, but Ashlyn had never forgotten it. She had also never really understood it until right at this very moment. And now Ali was telling her all of the things that Ashlyn hadn’t been able to back then. And the keeper believed her too. She knew that Ali wouldn’t care what her vagina did when she had her first orgasm in almost two months. Ashlyn didn’t doubt her for a second.

“Do you want to try leaning up against the headboard a little bit babe?” she asked as sexily as possible, kissing her way down Ashlyn’s long arm towards her hand as she moved up to the head of the bed and then patted the mattress and the pillows there invitingly. “You can use some of the pillows to help hold those gorgeous boobs of yours still” she licked her lips as she focused on her wife’s huge breasts.

Ashlyn got up and walked, on her knees, to the head of the bed. The dark, hungry look in Ali’s eyes took her breath away for a minute and she couldn’t say anything. The brunette held her by the hips for a minute and kissed and licked her way across the keeper’s stomach, running her warm hands up and down her sides with the lightest touch. When she pulled back she let her fingers hook into the loose waistband of Ashlyn’s sleep shorts and gave them a gentle tug, asking for permission to remove them. The keeper swallowed hard and nodded, trying to fight the self-consciousness she felt rising up inside her.

“You are so fucking gorgeous Ashlyn” Ali exhaled as she leaned forward and started to ease her shorts down past her hips. She wanted to be very careful as they moved past her incision so she took her time. “I swear” she bit her bottom lip as she took in the beautiful sight before her. “You are the sexiest person I have ever seen in my whole life and it’s taking all the self-control I have right now to go slow and not just eat you up right this second” she practically growled out.

“I love you Ali” her voice was part desire, part gratitude and part relief, all mixed together. “Thank you for being so good to me...”

Ali had the sleep shorts down around her wife’s knees and Ashlyn, encouraged by the lustful look on the brunette’s face, pulled the panties down and took her place at the head of the bed. She didn’t like wearing the big, loose, white panties but most of her own underwear was still too tight, especially across her lower abdomen and her c-section scar. Now that they were having sex again the blonde would need to go buy some new boxer briefs and boyshorts that fit her. Very soon. Ali helped her get into the best position at the headboard and then moved to her legs and pulled the clothes off of them, tossing them to the foot of the bed. She massaged and licked and nipped her way up one long leg and then repeated with the other. Once her mouth had sucked the soft skin at the top of both of Ashlyn’s thighs the keeper held her breath and spread her legs open for her. Ali smirked and felt her own core twitch at the beautiful sight.

“Fuck me you’re gorgeous” she shook her head and felt a flush already starting to rise up her own chest as she drooled over Ashlyn’s long-absent pussy.

The keeper blushed a little and was embarrassed because she thought her wife was laying it on a little thick. She was going to tell her that her ego wasn’t that delicate when she saw the brunette’s body start to respond to her own body. Damn that was hot. If Ashlyn had any doubts left about how much Ali wanted her they all disappeared as she watched the brunette’s chest start to pink up and her eyes start to get even darker.

“Fuck Al...” she groaned as she watched her wife move her hand all around her stomach and hips. She avoided her scar, except to press three feathery kisses along it, and dragged her hand down to her short hairs. Ali moaned out loud as she scratched lightly there and pressed another kiss into Ashlyn’s nearby thigh. “Fuck...”
“Oh I intend to” Ali purred as she licked and sucked her way from Ashlyn’s thigh to her center.

The keeper wasn’t as wet as she usually would be, especially after all the build-up. But they both knew about the vaginal dryness that came with breastfeeding for most women. Ali spent a few minutes exploring between her wife’s legs with her tongue and lips. Then she moved up and brought their lips together in a searing kiss that had Ashlyn moaning loudly and clawing at her back and ass.

“Don’t move, sexy” Ali got off the bed and got the lube out of their sex toy box in her closet by the head of the bed. “Anything in here you want besides the lube?”

Ashlyn shook her head no and swallowed hard. She was about to explode. She needed to oome, badly. She was almost too worked up and tried to swallow so she could explain to her wife. But Ali was back between her legs in less than a minute, pouring some lube into her hand and making sure her two middle fingers were nice and wet.

“You’re pretty wet but just in case” she grinned devilishly. “Can I start with one finger or do you want to try two?”

“One...” Ashlyn choked out around the desire that was filling her body and clogging her throat. “Let’s start with one.”

What Ali really wanted to do was spend about twenty minutes eating her wife out. She was dying to do that. But she remembered her first time post-baby and she didn’t feel that comfortable with Ashlyn’s head between her legs. It was all in her head, but it still made it hard for her to relax. So she just wasn’t going to give her keeper the chance to get nervous about that.

“Jesus you feel good around my finger...mmmmmmm...” the brunette moaned after she pushed her middle finger into Ashlyn’s hot core.

Ashlyn had both of her knees bent up and her legs were spread out wide for her wife. She held Ali’s left hand in her right, their fingers entwined. And the keeper’s free hand moved up from her incision, which didn’t hurt with Ali’s finger inside her, to hold on to her breasts and try to keep them from knocking around so much. Ali started to move her finger in and out at a slow, steady pace, letting her keeper get used to it. She needed Ashlyn to trust her and to trust her own body again. The brunette loved that they were holding hands. It was romantic and sweet and just the right reassurance her keeper needed as they got started. Ali took her time and kept her pace steady as she bent down and started to circle her wife’s clit with her tongue. Ashlyn’s body reacted immediately with a twitch. One of her legs started to tremble and she squeezed Ali’s hand hard as she moaned again.

“Ohhhh yesssssss...”

“Mmmmmmm...” Ali hummed into her bundle of nerves, making the blonde suck in a breath. “Does that feel good, beautiful?”

“Shit” Ashlyn exhaled and started to move her left arm around across her breasts a little bit, trying to find the right balance between holding them steady and playing with them. “So fucking good Al. So good...”

The brunette gradually increased her thrusting and her sucking and licking over the next several minutes and was encouraged by how wet her wife’s pussy was and how much her leg kept trembling. She was just about to ask if she wanted another finger but Ashlyn beat her to it.

“More...unnnhnhh...fuck...more, please” she panted out her request as the familiar flush started to cover her chest.
“Faster or harder or another finger...”

“All of that...please baby...” Ashlyn’s head was back against the pillow on the headboard and her eyes were only half-open while her mouth was getting slack.

Ali was so happy to hear her wife’s request and even happier to hear her answer. It seemed like she was really going to try to just enjoy this and that made Ali so proud of her strong, brave wife. The brunette made sure her second finger was good and wet and then pushed them both back inside her sexy keeper. She moved slowly but Ashlyn still felt ready and wet for her. Ali took less time this time and was back to her medium speed pumping in just a couple of minutes. She loved the way Ashlyn’s body was moving and bouncing with the thrusts. She felt bad for her breasts but it looked like she had a pretty good hold on them.

“Fuck Ashlyn” Ali husked out after a few more minutes. “I’m gonna come just from fucking you babe. God damn” she moved her face back to her wife’s clit and licked it and lapped at it. She finally sucked all of it into her talented mouth hard and flicked at it with her strong tongue. She hummed loudly into it again, knowing the vibrations would drive the blonde crazy. “Mmmmmmmmmmm...”

“Oh fuck...” Ashlyn groaned. “Baby I’m gonna come...oh shit...” the keeper let go of her wife’s hand and moved it to her own clit once Ali moved her mouth away. The brunette grabbed at the side of Ashlyn’s thigh and tried to get to her ass with her now free hand. She bit and nipped on the inside of the trembling thigh while she kept pumping, as fast as she could now, with her fingers. “Oh my God...” the keeper squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed her own clit hard and fast. “Alliiiiiiiiii...”

The orgasm swept over her and made her whole body shake and twitch. Ashlyn moved her hand away from her clit and pressed it against her incision, waiting to feel some pain or a tug or something. Her breasts hurt as she thrashed around for a minute but she didn’t care. She just wanted to enjoy the rush. Ali pulled her fingers out sooner than she normally would but she wanted to go up and hold her wife. She kissed her way up her body, even placing a gentle kiss at the top of each breast. The brunette lay alongside her wife and wrapped her arm across the safe part of her stomach, kissing her bare shoulder and neck as Ashlyn came down.

“You are so fucking sexy babe” she whispered into her ear. “Thank you for letting me love you...”

After several minutes Ashlyn rolled onto her side to face her beautiful brunette. They kissed for a long time, both wanting more but too tired for anything else that night. They wanted to stay close and prolong that feeling of connection before the real world came crashing back in on them. The 3am feeding was looming only two hours away now.

“So how was it?” Ali finally asked, when she couldn’t contain her curiosity any longer. “And just be honest. You won’t hurt my feelings if it wasn’t the best orgasm you ever had” she giggled.

“It was great” the keeper replied. “I kind of got scared right before I came so I feel like I sabotaged it right at the end” she looked bashfully at the cinnamon eyes six inches away. “But it felt so good. Everything felt so good. And it didn’t hurt when I came.”

“Right?” Ali raised her eyebrows. “I was so surprised that it didn’t hurt. I’d pictured it being painful or causing a big uterine contraction that would kill...”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought would happen. I thought I’d get a big uterine cramp like I had sometimes in the first few weeks” Ashlyn agreed with a nod of her head. Those fucking killed.”

“Well I’m glad this felt good for you Ash” she reached out and caressed her cheek. “And I promise, every time gets better. Your body starts to feel more like your body again and you get feeling more
confident..."

“Have I told you lately how much I love having you as a personal coach?” the keeper grinned and her dimple appeared in her left cheek.

“I’m sorry. I bet that’s really annoying, isn’t it?” Ali dropped her eyes.

“No!” the blonde leaned forward and kissed Ali’s nose and then her forehead. “I’m being real. I mean it. Thank you so much for helping me see what’s coming next. It’s really helpful.”

“Really?” the brunette lifted her eyes cautiously. “Don’t just say that to protect my feelings.”

“Al, I swear. Thank you. It’s unbelievably helpful that the person I trust more than anybody on the planet has gone through this before and knows what I’m nervous about before I even have to try and explain it.” She brought their lips together in a soft, slow kiss. Ashlyn was relieved to see a small smile gracing her wife’s face as they pulled apart again. “I just wish I could have been able to do it for you. You had to figure everything out on your own.”

The sad look on her keeper’s face made Ali’s heart melt.

“Aw, it wasn’t that bad. I had Syd to help me with most of it. Not the sex stuff so much, just a little I guess.”

They both chuckled and wrapped themselves up as close together as they could with their legs tangled up and their foreheads pressed together. Ali’s alarm was already set for 3am and, without discussing it, they both decided to just drift off to sleep naked in each other’s arms for the first time in forever. They would unlock doors and get dressed again before they fed the twins. But for those two hours they were going to stay as connected as possible and enjoy their own skin to skin contact. It was probably the thing they missed the most since having kids. But, in the grand scheme of things, they would happily trade all of those sexy, intimate things they had done when they were childless for any one of their kids. Life was hard and challenging for them now but, sooner than they would really like, the twins would be crawling and then talking and then walking and then moving into their big kid beds and getting potty-trained. It was dizzying to think about.

“Can you believe we have four kids?” Ashlyn asked quietly after several minutes.

“I can’t” Ali shook her head and smiled back at the blonde. “I still can’t believe you said you loved me too when I finally got up the courage to tell you how I felt 7-1/2 years ago.”

“What a day that was” the keeper chuckled. “Best day of my life.”

“Best day ever” Ali agreed and sighed contentedly.

They were quiet for another couple of minutes. They should have been sleeping but it was as if neither of them wanted the time to end. They were so tired and their voices were heavy with exhaustion, but their faces both wore smiles, even as they yawned back and forth.

“I can’t believe your dad heard us” Ali blushed and closed her eyes in embarrassment.

“Yeah, thanks for bringing that up” Ashlyn teased. “I was pretty close to wiping that from my memory entirely” she said sarcastically and rolled her eyes.

“Oh well” Ali shrugged. “At least we don’t have to worry about him saying anything about it to anybody” she laughed softly.
“True” Ashlyn nodded. “The quietest man in the whole extended family is definitely the one to pick for this mission” she giggled. “Thank God for that.”

“Kyle’s mad at me for something but I haven’t had time to figure out what it is yet” Ali confessed after another pause in the conversation.

“Why do you think he’s mad at you?”

“Well he didn’t come up this weekend and I know Nate had it off because Jared let something slip about spending Nate’s long weekend off with him in NYC” she started. “And now he’s not going to make it up for mom’s birthday weekend either.”

“Yeah, that seems like a lot to miss so close together. That sucks. I’m sorry honey” the keeper squeezed her wife in sympathy.

“Ash, I...I’m sorry I don’t have your present yet. But I know what it is. It’s just not ready yet...”

“Sweetheart, what are you talking about? My birthday’s not for months. Did you hit your head or something...?”

“Ha ha, very funny” Ali made a face at her confused wife. “Your present for having the babies. You know, like you’ve given me after both of my pregnancies.”

“Oh” Ashlyn nodded thoughtfully. “I guess I never thought about it like that. Is that what you meant in the truck the other day, when we talked?”

“Yes. I feel awful that I don’t have it yet. I just don’t want you to think I’ve forgotten about it or anything like that...”

“Well I don’t think there’s a time limit on it or anything” the keeper chuckled. “But thank you for telling me Al.”

“You gave me my charm bracelet right away I think. And you had those beautiful pearls for me when we went to the Beauport after Josie was born” the sad chocolate eyes looked so full of remorse that Ashlyn thought her wife might cry.

“Ali it’s ok. I love that you’re getting me something special and whenever it’s ready I’m going to love getting it. Please don’t feel bad baby. This twin thing is harder than just having one baby. That’s just the way it is. Plus we’ve already got the two other ones we have to take care of when we remember to” she winked. “All I’m saying is that it was easier both of those other times for me to sneak away and take care of some things like that than it is for you now. Cut yourself some slack honey. You’re doing great.”

The brunette gave Ashlyn a long, deep kiss after that exchange. She had been feeling guilty about that for days. They snuggled some more and were about to drift off to sleep.

“And something’s up with Syd” the brunette continued after another big yawn. “She’s trying to tell me something but we didn’t have any time together today.”

“Maybe tomorrow at the beach you can talk.”

“Maybe” Ali sighed. “We should really try and get some sleep sweetheart. As much as I’m loving our time together right now...”

“You’re right. We’re going to hate ourselves in the morning.” They both chuckled and groaned at
the thought. “Hey, what do you want to do for your birthday?”

“Ash, we talked about this already. We’re just going to bunker down this summer. No trips, no vacations, just being at home with the kids and trying to get it figured out. Right?”

“I know, but, it’s your birthday baby” she whined a little bit. “I want to do something special for you.”

“This” Ali said distinctly. “I want this on my birthday. I want us to be close and to have sex and to snuggle and talk. Make that happen and I’ll be the happiest woman in the world.”

“Deal” the keeper grinned and kissed her wife’s lips again. “I love you.”

Chapter End Notes

And here's hoping Ali gets to play tonight. I'm pretty sure Jill were put her in against Marta. Lucky Ali. I just hope she doesn't get put in with some makeshift backline that's never played together and gets embarrassed. One of the only good things from the Australia game is that Ali didn't look bad out there on that awful, embarrassing goal. Anyway, GO KRIEGY!!!!!!!!!!!!!
Gratitude

The next week was one of the most fun they would have all summer long. It was the first of Mike Harris’ two weeks with them and it was the first time that Sydney had started coming to the big old house almost every day with her boys. Cash would be turning 6 years old in two months and James was 1-1/2 years old and crazy cute. Sandi Leroux came over as often as she could, reveling in the opportunity to spend time with her beautiful grandsons as well as her friend Deb. The whole scenario was a repeat of what they had done two years earlier after Josie had been born. Except with less drama and more kids. Sydney still brought the boys up to the beach in the summer when Ali wasn’t home on maternity or family leave, just not nearly as often. The two best friends knew those summers when they were both free from work schedules were rare and special and they both tried their best to take advantage of them.

It was surprisingly relaxed, despite the four kids who were big enough to walk, although James was still just getting his legs underneath him. He had been slow to crawl and walk but was getting the hang of it. Ashlyn was feeling pretty good, seven weeks after delivering the twins. Most of the symptoms and issues from the pregnancy and c-section had gone away or, at least, diminished significantly. She still had the varicose vein and one stubborn hemorrhoid but she had started to do some of the exercises and had lost some more weight. Her incision had healed nicely and was mostly pain-free. If she twisted too far and bent over for too long or picked up something just a little bit too heavy she would feel a twinge. It wasn’t painful as much as it was uncomfortable. The keeper was starting to feel more like her old self and honestly believed that she and her body might be friends again someday soon. Her recovery had been moving faster than either of Ali’s had. But that was one of Ashlyn’s blessings in life. She had always had light and easy monthly periods and somehow her reproductive organs worked faster than most and had already shrunk down to their normal size again. She and Ali were both still tired, all the time. But they felt like they were starting to find their rhythm and beginning to understand how to keep the babies on the same schedule.

Ali encouraged her wife to go to the beach with her father and the kids every morning. Ashlyn, of course, was hesitant to go and leave the twins behind. The brunette told her that she and her mom could handle them for the 10am feeding just fine without her. The whole group would be back for lunch anyway and she could always pump then if she needed to. On the days when Sandi was there, she and Deb stayed at the house with the twins and sent everybody else down to the beach for the morning. It was wonderful. Ashlyn still had to take it easy but she could definitely pick up James and little Josie without any struggle so she didn’t feel totally useless. She was still self-conscious about her belly and she wore a t-shirt or tank-top over her bathing suit top. But just being in the sand and salt air made her whole body feel better. It was Thursday morning and Sydney had arranged it so that Deb and Sandi went to the beach with Mike Harris and Ashlyn and the four bigger kids. She and Ali stayed behind at the house to take care of the twins. The brunette was thinking of bringing the newest members of the family down to the beach for a short, first-time trip after their 10am bottles and was distracted by these thoughts as her best friend tried to get her attention.

“Yo, Kriegs, hellooooo...” Sydney snapped her fingers in front of Ali’s face as they sat together on the couch in the family room. It was almost 8:30am by the time they got everybody covered in sunscreen and out the door. They had about 90 minutes before they would need to feed the twins. “I need to talk to you about something.”

Sydney’s face was an odd mixture of anxious and excited and she turned so she was sitting sideways on the couch, facing Ali.

“Sorry boo” Ali smiled sheepishly. “I was just trying to figure out if we could bring the babies for a
quick trip to the beach after we feed them...” she shook her head and focused on her friend. “What’s up?”

As soon as she asked the question and saw the look on Sydney’s face she knew this was it. The coach was finally ready to tell her whatever it was that she had been trying to tell her for about a week now. Ali turned her body sideways to mirror Sydney’s and reached for her hands. Sydney seemed surprised by the touch but then squeezed the brunette’s hands and grinned.

“Oh man, I can’t believe I’m even saying this” she breathed out and closed her eyes, still smiling widely.

Ali felt like she might explode from the suspense.

“What is it Syd?”

The coach opened her eyes again and made a grinning eek face at her best friend as she held her breath for a few seconds. Finally, she blurted it out.

“I’m pregnant!”

“What?!” Ali’s voice went up very high at the end and turned into a squeal when Sydney started to giggle.

“You heard me Auntie Alibaba” she giggled again as Ali hugged her.

“So, umm, this is obviously good news” the brunette said with a questioning quirk of her eyebrow.

“Yes. I mean, it’s a fucking surprise” Sydney rolled her eyes and then smiled again. “But yeah, we’re happy about it.”

“Wait, so you weren’t trying?”

“No, we were good with two. We both sort of just assumed that would be it” she chuckled. “It was hard to get pregnant last time so, I don’t know, we just both thought it would always be hard to get pregnant.”

“So no more pill” Ali nodded, understanding her bestie before she could even explain.

“We talked about it and Dom agreed that it probably wasn’t necessary for us any more. I’m fucking 39 years old for God’s sake” she rolled her eyes again. “Between that and our history we just figured it wouldn’t happen again.”

“And if it did, then what a nice surprise it would be.”

“Exactly” Sydney beamed. “Surprise!”

The coach went on to explain that it had happened while they were away last month celebrating their 7th wedding anniversary. She missed her period two weeks ago and had just gotten the official results back yesterday.

“I wanted to tell you last weekend, but Dom thought we should wait for the official confirmation instead of just trusting the pregnancy tests I took last week.”

“Aww, I’m so glad you’re telling me now” Ali gave her a nose-crinkling smile and hugged her again. “I’m so happy for you boo. So fucking happy.”
“It’s a good thing we didn’t put the swimming pool in” she laughed as they pulled apart. “We’re gonna need that money for another college fund!”

“You come up here and swim anytime you want. You know that. And if you want the pool you can always call Vicki. She’d love to have you guys over.”

“I know” Sydney smiled.

“And it’s not a freaking competition Leroux” Ali tried to make a stern face but couldn’t get the smile to leave her face. “Just because I have four now doesn’t mean you have to keep trying to outdo me” she teased and they both laughed for several minutes.

“It’s funny how things work out isn’t it? I was so worried about Cassius being an only child and now we’re gonna have baby #3” she shook her head slowly, in wonder. “Unbelievable.”

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Kyle, Nathan and Luna came up two days later, without telling anybody they were coming, to help celebrate Deb’s birthday which was on Sunday. Ali had called her brother several times over the past week trying to talk to him about what was bothering him and why he was angry with her. But they kept missing each other. She didn’t want to bother her mom about it, especially not so close to her birthday. She was considering calling Nathan to try and find out what was going on, but then they appeared unannounced in her driveway late Saturday morning.

“You guys!” she grinned as she greeted them both with hugs in the driveway. “Jared, you get one too” she chuckled as she hugged Nathan’s younger brother, and her co-worker at K-H, who had picked them up at the train station in Boston.

“It’s not my fault! I had nothing to do with it!” Jared put his hands up in surrender. “I’m just as surprised as you are.”

“Can we stay with you sis?” Kyle asked as he put his arm over Ali’s shoulders.

“Are you kidding?” her eyebrows went up in excitement. “Of course you can. Always. You guys can have Meg’s room. Ashlyn’s dad is in the guest room...”

Deb and Mike Christopher came over around lunch time and discovered the surprise too. They all hung out that afternoon and evening and Deb said that was the best birthday present she could have asked for. Kyle was his usual, lovable self and Ali couldn’t figure out what was going on. She was grateful that whatever had been upsetting him seemed to have passed. It wasn’t until later that night that the siblings got a chance to talk.

“Hey, can I come in” Kyle knocked softly on the open bedroom door at the top of the backstairs.

“Yeah bro, come in” Ashlyn replied and yawned from her spot, leaning up against the headboard.

“Is everything ok?” Ali asked, concern creasing her face as she tried to read her brother’s face from her spot next to her wife on the bed.

“Yeah, I just...I need to apologize to you Alex” he answered and looked down nervously as he stood next to the bed, close to Ashlyn.

“Ummm...I can’t really get up and leave right this minute...” the keeper nodded down at Lily who was nursing. “She should be done in about fifteen minutes or so though.”
“Oh you don’t have to go Ash” Kyle smiled bashfully at his sister-in-law. “I just wanted to make sure we talked before it got too late, sorry to interrupt.”

“Ky, what’s going on?” Ali pulled her legs up and sat cross-legged as she fed Dodge his 10pm bottle. She patted the bed where her legs had just been stretched out. “Come sit.”

Kyle walked around the foot of the bed, sat in front of his sister and put his hand on her leg as he smiled at his nephew. Babies made the cutest, most reassuring and comforting gurgling and breathing sounds when they nursed or drank from the bottle and the nervous man felt his heart rate calming down as he sat there listening to them. Ali let him take his time but her curiosity was killing her. Finally, after a couple of minutes, he started to talk.

“I’m really sorry I’ve been such an asshole” he began, sitting up and taking a deep breath to settle his nerves. “This turning 40 bullshit really messed with my head and I got super needy and insecure” he shook his head. “I was sick of myself, so I don’t know how Nate put up with me” he chuckled.

“I don’t think you were an asshole BB” Ali frowned at him as she tried to understand what he was talking about. “I thought you were mad at me and I really wasn’t sure why...” she stopped when she saw his jaw clench and his back stiffen. “But I’d really like to know why. Will you tell me?” her voice was soft.

Kyle took another big breath.

“I was pissed that you didn’t come down for my birthday” he said quickly and glanced up at his sister in time to see the shocked look on her face. “But I got over it. I’m over it. It took me a little while but I finally got it through my thick skull that if you could have come to New York, you would have.”

“I’m really sorry” her voice was almost a whisper, her face scrunched up as she tried not to cry. “I wanted to go so bad...” she looked at Ashlyn for verification or validation of her claim.

“We really tried to find a way...” Ashlyn began.

“No, don’t do that” Kyle interrupted, shaking his head and closing his eyes. “If you could have come down, you would have. I know that now. I just had to...pull my head out of my own ass. It took a while” he shrugged and looked sad. “It’s a big ass.”

Ashlyn chuckled and felt bad because she was the only one laughing.

“Is that why you didn’t come up last weekend?” Ali’s voice was small and quiet as she watched her brother intently.

“Yeah” he admitted and looked down, embarrassed that he had behaved like a toddler instead of a 40-year old man.

“Are you still mad at me?” she held her breath, afraid of the answer.

“No Alex, no” he smiled and squeezed her leg. “That’s why I’m here. I want to tell you how sorry I am that I was an idiot. I know you guys are busy right now, busier than ever. I was here for two weeks, I get it. I swear I do.”

“But I made it to Tanner’s graduation” Ali offered. “Is that what hurt your feelings?”

“No” he locked eyes with his sister. “How do you know me so damned well?” a tiny grin graced his face.
“What was it then?” the brunette asked, not giving up her hunt for the truth.

Lily had finished nursing and Ashlyn handed her to Kyle with a burp cloth and a smile.

“What was it Godfather. Burp away. I’m gonna pee.”

Kyle put the burp cloth on his chest up near his shoulder and beamed down at his niece and goddaughter. He held her little body against his chest and started patting her back, waiting for her to burp. Ashlyn got out of the bed and went into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

“What was it BB?” Ali tried to get him back on track and answering her question.

“The Women’s World Cup stuff” he admitted and blushed out of embarrassment. “I know it’s an amazing opportunity that you couldn’t turn down. I know it was. I’m not that dumb.” He sighed, exasperated with himself. “It just...at the time...ugh, I don’t know. It made me mad that you found time to do that but couldn’t make time to come visit me on my birthday. My 40th fucking birthday.”

Ali was quiet again, trying to figure out how she wanted to handle her insecure brother.

“Ash told me you guys talked and how hard 40 was for you and I should have made time when you were here in May so we could have talked about it. That’s totally my fault Ky. I’m sorry.”

“You’re taking care of twins this summer. That trumps everything else” he chuckled.

“Yes, but you only turn 40 once and I wasn’t there for you” she sighed heavily and closed her eyes. “This feels like me and Syd after Drew was born and she went back to work at the end of the summer. I promised myself I wouldn’t do that to anybody I loved again” she looked at her brother’s handsome face and frowned pitifully. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

“No, this is different. It was a one-time party and you’ve got four kids now. It’s not the same at all” he smiled at his sister who had still managed not to cry. “And if I hadn’t been so delicate about turning 40 in the first place I wouldn’t have even gotten upset. I’m here to apologize to you Alex, not to make you feel guilty about it.”

They sat together with the babies for a few more minutes without saying anything. Ashlyn came out of the bathroom and tried to figure out if the siblings had moved past the issue or not. She stood awkwardly in the doorway for almost a full minute.

“Babe, can you put Lily to bed, please?” Ali asked, giving her the answer she was looking for. Clearly they needed another couple of minutes.

“No problem” the keeper moved over to that side of the bed to take her daughter from Kyle. “Did she burp?” she asked him as she picked the baby girl up.

“Yes. Like a champ” Kyle smiled. “Thanks Ash.”

Ali lifted Dodge up to burp him but Kyle reached over and took him from her. He added a second burp cloth to his chest and kissed the baby boy’s cheek.

“How about I burp you tonight and save your mommy some pukey spit up for a change?” He held the baby close to his chest and started to pat him on the back. “That’s a good boy” he kept patting and leaned his head back to try and see Dodge’s face. “You just go ahead and let me have your worst little man. I’ve got you.”

As she sat there watching her sweet brother love her baby son, Ali felt so proud of the 40-year old
man. Kyle Krieger was certainly not a perfect human being. But he was one of the most loving and honest people she had ever known. If she doubted how much he cared about or understood their life in the big old house that summer, the fact that he even knew that Dodge was a happy spitter was all the proof she would need to prove otherwise. She knew she would regret not going to his party for the rest of her life. But she also knew that she had made the right decision by staying at home instead. Kyle coming to her and telling her about his feelings and apologizing for his reaction was a pretty remarkable example of his growth and maturity over the past few years. Ali knew that her brother really did understand why she couldn’t go to his party and he truly had come to say he was sorry for his behavior. She was pretty sure her already enormous love for him had just grown even greater in that moment.

“I’m so proud of you” she said softly as she put both her hands on his leg in front of her. “You went through something really hard and you’re here talking to me about it even though I hurt you. You’ve come so far” she started to snuffle as her emotions finally began to get the best of her. “You’re such a good man and I just love you so much.”

“I know you do sis” his voice was choked in his throat until he cleared it and settled his own swirling emotions. He smiled broadly at his sister. “I got your present this past week and it just...it blew me away. It’s beautiful. I don’t know how you found the time to do that but it means the world to me and I’ll treasure it forever...”

It hadn’t been easy but the brunette had made time, a little bit every other day once they got home from the hospital with the twins, to work on the memory book that she had given her brother for his birthday. She had been working on it, writing memories, finding and printing off photographs, for months. She had asked both her parents for help finding the pictures she was looking for and had managed to get about 25 of them that Spring. She bought a beautiful, leather bound scrap book that looked very rich and masculine and would fit in well with the décor of his condo. He always joked that he liked to be the shiniest thing in his own home. She wrote out a different memory of her beloved brother on each page of the scrapbook, filling 40 pages. One for each year of his life. The brunette had most of the book completed before the babies came, thankfully. She taped and glued in each of the pictures that went with 25 of the memories and, for the pages without a corresponding picture, she made an attempt to draw a simple part of the memory, just so there was something visual on each page. She wasn’t an artist and never claimed to be, but she had spent a lot of time putting that book together. She mailed it down to him once she was sure she couldn’t make the trip and when he opened it and read it he couldn’t believe it.

“If it’s beautiful it’s only because it’s all about you” she complimented with a small, sincere smile.

“Oh stop, don’t stop” he teased quietly and continued trying to burp his nephew.

“Did you really like it?” she asked shyly and dried the tears from her cheeks. “I know the drawings are terrible but I figured you’d at least get a laugh out of them...”

“Al, seriously” he locked eyes with his sister. “The reason I was upset that you couldn’t come to my party was because I was feeling less important in your life, I think. Or...like I didn’t matter anymore.” She started to interrupt him but he cut her off and kept going. “And I know it’s not true. I know it’s not, but you know how it is when I get something in my head” he looked sheepishly at her and smiled when he saw her roll her eyes. “I felt like you didn’t have time for me. That’s what hurt. And then here is this beautiful book that must have taken you...I don’t even want to think about how long it took you to do all of that” his eyes went wide. “But here it was in my hands. This book that literally represented hours and hours and hours of your time that you took and spent on me. Just me. And then” his voice broke as he got choked up again, “when you factor that into your world here with everything you have going on now...I was just floored. How could I ever have doubted how
much you cared about me? or how important I was in your life? If you sacrificed your sleep at a time like this” he looked down at Dodge and around the room, moving his head in a big, slow circle, “to write down all of your favorite memories about me and us growing up. Well, it was a lot more than the time you would have spent coming to my party.” He smiled when he saw Ali grinning at him. “I love you so much Alex and I’m sorry I got fragile and doubted you or us for a few days. I’m a jerk and I’m sorry.”

“I love you Kyle and I think your 40s are going to be your best years yet” she bent over and kissed his knee. “I can’t wait to be here for you and with you as you kick ass and crush life.”

Dodge burped, a medium messy burp, and they both laughed at the timely interruption.

“Well, now that he’s added his comments” Kyle chuckled. “Are we ok? Can you forgive me?”

“There’s nothing to forgive. Just don’t ever doubt how much I love you again. Ok?” she asked with a quirk of her eyebrow.

“Ok. I won’t” he smiled again and let Ali help him get the pukey burp cloth off of his chest. “Can you believe I just willingly encouraged another human being to throw up on me?” his eyebrows went up high. “Maybe I am really growing up.”

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By the time the month of July was over Ali finally felt like she had apologized to and been forgiven for and made up for her missteps and oversights during the first two months of the twins’ lives. She had made peace with Kyle. She had spent time with Sydney and her boys and loved almost every minute of it. She had made sure to write a thoughtful card and mail it to all of the people who had helped them so much already that summer. Whitney & Ryan, Ken & Vicki, Tammye & Carol, the Donaldsons next door, Sydney & Dom, Niki & Molly, Koty & Brianna, Marcy at work, Jared at work, Jen Tucker at work, Kyle & Nathan, her mom & Mike, Sandi Leroux, Sarah & Erin, and surprisingly even Carm & Kacey all received heartfelt, handwritten cards from the brunette. Carm had really settled down once she and Kacey had gotten engaged. Their wedding was going to be a huge party up in New Hampshire next June and both Ashlyn and Ali were looking forward to it. Ali had been forgiven by Ashlyn for not getting the hotel room for their big sexy night. That was an easy forgive and the keeper was quick to make that clear to her wife. The brunette had done a dozen sweet, romantic and thoughtful things for Ashlyn since that first night after the fireworks. She brought her flowers, wrote her love letters, gave her massages, cooked her favorite meal. The keeper finally had to tell her to quit doing so many things or else she was going to feel like she had to try and keep up and she wasn’t sure she could do that just yet. They agreed to scale it back to a more normal level.

Ashlyn did, however, allow her beautiful brunette to do one last special thing that month to ‘make up’ for not getting the hotel room. After they had agreed to scale back, Ali told her keeper that she had planned to show off some new lingerie that she had bought. Ashlyn wisely agreed to let that one, final event take place and then they would go back to the usual level of sweet, romantic gestures. It was the morning after and Ali turned off her 6:30am alarm, already awake even though they had stayed up much too late having sex. They would have to get up at 7am to feed the twins and help Deb with breakfast for Drew and Josie too. Breakfast time was always the most hectic time of the day for some reason. The brunette knew she should wait until later in the day but she just didn’t want to. She had planned to incorporate the gift into the fun of last night but when she was in the middle of it there didn’t seem to be a good segue between hot, still a little gentle with the keeper’s belly area, lingerie sex and the baby gift Ali was finally ready to give to her wife for carrying their two newest additions. It just didn’t feel right last night.
Instead, the brunette rolled towards the middle of the bed and tugged the sheet down, away from Ashlyn’s shoulders. The keeper didn’t move and Ali could hear her soft snores when she leaned her head over her shoulder and pressed a kiss to her cheek. They had successfully gotten their pajamas back on before the 3am feeding and the brunette ran her hand down across the top of Ashlyn’s chest, above her breasts.

“Babe, can you wake up for me, pleeeeeease” she whispered softly against her wife’s ear, finishing her request with a kiss to that same ear and a gentle tapping on her chest up by her collarbone. “Ash-lyn” she sing-songed quietly.

The keeper’s face twitched and then she groaned and then she put her hand on top of her wife’s hand and patted it twice. She squinted at the clock on the nightstand.

“We still have half an hour...” she croaked out sleepily.

“Come on All-star” Ali cooed into her ear with a giggle. “I need you to wake up for me so I can give you something.”

“But you said you were going to stop doing so many nice things for me after last night...” she whined, stretched her legs out and rolled onto her back and into her wife’s front. “You promised” she pouted as she blinked her beautiful hazel eyes open. They were a light tan color in the morning light with just a hint of green around the perimeter.

“You’re right” Ali kissed her lips sweetly. “But this isn’t that” she giggled as she looked at how adorable the blonde was. “Are you awake?” she asked as she caressed Ashlyn’s face with the back of her fingers. “I have your present.”

The keeper forced her tired eyes open and yawned. Ali playfully poked at her tongue and made Ashlyn smile and try to pull her closer.

“You want my tongue again hmmm?” she smirked as her eyes opened a little farther.

“No, babe, come on, we don’t have much time and I can’t wait anymore” she resisted the blonde’s pull and gently patted her cheek to try and wake her all the way up.

“Ok, ok” Ashlyn chuckled. She turned her head to the side and kissed the inside of Ali’s palm. Then she stuck her tongue out and licked it like a brat.

“Ashlyn” the brunette giggled and pulled her hand away from her wife’s grinning face.

“Wait, did you say present?” Ashlyn all of a sudden realized what her wife had said and propped herself up on her elbows to look around the bed. “Where is it?”

“There’s my girl” Ali laughed, leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “Thank you for waking up early babe. I know it hurts and I’m sorry. But I just can’t wait any more.”

The keeper sat up and leaned against the headboard, rubbing her eyes and stretching one more time as Ali crawled to her nightstand drawer and came back with a nicely wrapped jewelry box about the size of Blu-Ray box.

“Well this looks fancy and beautiful” she admired the wrapped box from all sides and angles. “Thank you so much honey, I love it” she teased.

Ali giggled and rolled her eyes. She hoped she never got tired of her wife’s silly jokes.
“Try unwrapping it and opening it smart-ass” she sassed back but couldn’t keep the grin off of her face.

They were both quiet as Ashlyn unwrapped the jewelry box and stole a glance at her excited and anxious wife.

“And why are you giving me a present when it’s not even your birthday yet my love?”

“This is your present that I should have given you a month ago, after your six-week appointment” she swallowed what was left of her guilt. “I promised you I wouldn’t apologize anymore for that so I can’t say it...but this is my tiny way of saying thank you for doing such an amazing job carrying our babies and delivering them for us. You were so good and strong and brave and I know it was hard Ash and I just can’t believe what a great job you did. So thank you. From the bottom of my heart and the deepest part of my soul. Thank you.”

She held her breath as the blonde lifted the hinged lid of the jewelry box to reveal the necklace and earrings set that had been custom-made for her.

“Oh Al, this is so awesome...” she enthused with wide eyes as she started to get choked up. “I absolutely love it. It’s perfect! And the eyes are emeralds because that’s their birthstone, just like Drew.”

Ashlyn lifted the white gold necklace out of the box and held it up in front of her. It was very similar to her shark pendant necklace that she loved so much. Ali had felt like a copy-cat for a while but she decided that it was too good of an idea to let go because her keeper had gone out and bought something similar before her gift was ready. One of the Revolution players had a cousin who did custom jewelry and Dom had told them all about it, giving both Ali and Ashlyn similar ideas. The pendant was a bull’s head, complete with horns, that faced outward as if it were charging at you. The two eyes were beautiful emeralds, not too big, but just big enough. The pendant was about 2” in both directions, maybe a little wider with the full length of the horns. There were matching emerald earrings with the stone set in a white gold perimeter with two small bull horns coming out of each side.

“Part of the reason it wasn’t ready was because I wasn’t sure if the babies were going to be Taurus or Gemini” Ali explained and shrugged. “I had to wait until they were born to be sure because they were close to the cusp.”

“Wait, that’s what this bull is?” Ashlyn’s voice got even more excited.

“Yeah, Taurus the bull. Like Gemini the twins, which they almost were” the brunette chuckled. “Their due date would have made them Geminis.”

“That’s so cool!” Ashlyn’s face broke into a dimpled grin as she held it up closer to her face. “I love it. And look at these earrings!”

“Do you really like it? I thought it was such a good idea and then you came home with your shark necklace...”

“Oooh, you must have been so pissed...”

Ali laughed and kissed her wife’s lips.

“I wasn’t pissed, but I couldn’t think of anything better. So I hope it’s still ok...”

“Woman, I love this. It’s perfect for me and I can’t wait to wear it. And the earrings. Thank you so
Ashlyn pulled the brunette in for another kiss, but this one, despite morning breath, was longer and slower and deeper and they both melted into it. Ashlyn’s alarm went off and she reached over to her nightstand without breaking the kiss. Ali giggled against her lips when the keeper had trouble dismissing the alarm and then leaned back, ending the kiss.

“Shall we?” the brunette asked as she got up off the bed and stood next to her beautiful keeper, ready to go feed their children.

“Yeah, let’s do it” Ashlyn grinned again as she put her new earrings in. She knew better than to put the necklace on. It wouldn’t last ten minutes before one of the babies grabbed it and yanked it from her neck. “Let’s see if anybody notices” she giggled.

And the month of reckoning also included a big gift from the young Krieger family to Deb as a tiny thank you for spending her past five summers with them and helping them raise their babies during that time. It was the following Friday, July 28th and Ashlyn was taking Ali out for her birthday dinner. It was Date Night with the Crosses and Dwyers and the Dwyers were the babysitters that month. Ali and Ashlyn were going to drop off Drew and Josie there and leave Deb and Mike to babysit the twins for the evening.

“Alex, I’ve told you a hundred times you don’t need to get me anything for spending time with my grandchildren” she chastised with a shake of her head.

“I know mom, and we haven’t. Until now” Ali replied with a warm smile as she stood next to her mother at the nook in the back corner of the family room.

Deb and Mike Christopher were sitting there after just finishing dinner with Drew and Josie. The children had just run off to the mudroom to put their shoes on before their trip to the Dwyers. Drew could do a good job, especially with the Velcro closure sneakers. Josie struggled but insisted on trying, every time. Her moms loved that about her. She wanted to do everything Drew could do even though she was two years younger. That just wasn’t a good enough reason, in her little opinion, for her to not be able to do everything just like her big brother.

“Listen Deb” Ashlyn added, standing next to her wife, “We’re not trying to make you uncomfortable or make it seem like you’re only here helping us because you expect something in return. That’s the last thing we want to do. We know you’re here because you love the kids and us and you’re just doing the ‘Grandma’ thing” Ashlyn used air quotes. “So please let us give you this one gift to try and show you how much we appreciate having you here with us.”

“Please mom” Ali chimed in and offered a similarly pleading, smiling face as her wife.

“You girls are just too much” Deb chuckled and picked up the envelope. “Just this one time” she quirked her eyebrow up at them both and stopped opening the envelope as she waited for their reply.

“Absolutely.”

“If that’s what you want, mom.”

“Alright then” she smiled. “Thank you.”

Deb opened the envelope and sucked in a breath as she read through the contents. It was a trip for two to Italy through a tour group that Deb had been interested in joining for a few years. It was a two-week tour that started in Florence and travelled down to Rome, stopping in four other towns along the way. It was booked for April but Deb had a few weeks to change it to next September or
October instead if she wanted to.

“Oh my God, this is unbelievable!” she enthused as her voice rose in excitement. “Four days in
Florence, then a day each in Siena, Montalcino, Bolsena, Trevignano Romano and then four days in
Rome!”

Ali was pretty sure she had never seen her mom quite this surprised and excited. Deb had always
wanted to go to Italy and one of her cousins and she had long-standing, and not very realistic, plans
to take a trip there together. The real question was going to be who would make the trip with
her...her husband or her cousin? Deb was so overwhelmed she cried as she pulled her daughter into a
big hug from her seat in the nook.

“Why is Gwandma cwying?” Drew asked as he came back over to the table and hugged his mama’s
leg.

“Oh sweet boy” Deb wiped her tears off of her face as Ali stood back up and tried to keep her
mascara from running down her face. “Your mamas just gave me the most wonderful present and
I’m so happy” she explained as she stood up and hugged Ashlyn.

“They’re happy tears buddy” Ali assured him with a smile. “Everything’s good.”

The debate had been about the sort of precedent they were setting with this gift. And, of course,
whose feelings were going to get hurt because they didn’t get a trip to Italy from the harried and
grateful young parents. After a lot of discussion and a few days of hard thinking, Ali and Ashlyn
decided that if somebody in the family got upset and felt like they were getting short shrift then that
was just going to be there problem, not Ali, Ashlyn or Deb’s. Ali’s mom had been in their house
with them for five summers now, including the current one. A big reason for that was that Deb had
her summers off and had the freedom and flexibility to be able to do it. Nobody else had made that
kind of commitment or given up that much of their time. Everybody had helped over the years in
some capacity and to the best that their schedule would allow and Ali and Ashlyn were just as
grateful for it. But nobody could touch what Deb had done for them. Nobody.
Caught!

Chapter Notes

Only a couple more chapters left in this installment. But I've got a million ideas for the drop-in chapters that will come next. If you want to see anything specific let me know and I'll try and prioritize that way if it's something I've already got in mind. Also, I started a Tumblr blog dedicated to this story. Literally just started it and will add lots more to it once I get this part of the story finished. Not sure anybody would be interested in that or not, but just in case you are it's 'beautymothemoonlight124' Teeny tiny smut warning for this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

August brought with it the usual fun, summertime get-togethers and events. The young Krieger family stuck pretty close to home but still managed to enjoy themselves. It was times like that when they were very grateful to live so close to the beach. Every weekend could be a fun beach weekend without lifting a finger. Hell, every damned day could be a beach day when you lived two blocks away from the ocean and beach like they did. Every month that had gone by since Ali Krieger moved into the big old house with her, Ashlyn grew more and more sure she had done the right thing by renovating and restoring her grandmother’s home. She shuddered when she thought about what her life might be like now if she hadn’t made that decision.

All year long the Dwyers, Crosses and Flanagans had been trying to convince the Kriegers to come on the big 4-family summer vacation again. Ashlyn and Ali had bowed out of the week-long vacation for this year as soon as Molly had started planning it back in February. They would have loved to have gone but the twins would be 3-months old in August and they weren’t sleeping through the night yet and they were worried about disrupting everybody else’s sleep habits and ruining the vacation. Ashlyn tried to talk Ali into going and bringing Drew and Josie so they could at least have a fun week of vacation on the lake again. The keeper knew Whitney and Ryan would help her wife with their two eldest children. But there was no way Ali was leaving her wife behind that summer. They had agreed to hunker down and that’s what they were going to do.

“But none of us cares that the babies aren’t sleeping through the night yet” Niki tried to reason with her friend two weeks before the vacation. She and Whitney had been sent to twist the keeper’s arm and get her to agree to come on vacation with them. They were sitting in the backyard of the big old house drinking beer and playing with the dogs. “You guys have to come. We made a deal last summer. Annual event.”

“Nik, I appreciate what you’re trying to do but, honestly, we’re just chilling at home this summer. Like we said in February.”

“The reason you won’t come is because you don’t want to ruin the vacation for the rest of us with crying babies who don’t sleep through the night yet, right?” Whitney asked with a quirked eyebrow.

“Right” Ashlyn replied and rolled her eyes. “You guys are wasting your breath.”

“Just hold on a sec, geez” the lawyer rolled her eyes at her best friend. “What you don’t know is that Molly found a bigger house, right on Squam Lake, and there’s more than enough room for everybody. And there are two bedrooms and a full bathroom in the basement and you and Ali can
stay down there with the twins and you won’t bother any of the rest of us at night because we’ll all be up on the second floor.”

“And there are two bedrooms on the third floor with bunk beds and we can get all the kids up there if we want. We’ll be able to hear them if they get up so we can keep a good eye on Drew and Josie and Meg for you while you’re in the basement” Niki added enthusiastically.

Ashlyn was intrigued and her two friends knew it. She asked a few basic questions about the house and the site on the lake and the dock and the boating arrangement and all of those things. They really felt like they had won her over.

“I don’t know you guys” she shook her head slowly, deep in thought still. “They’re only three months old. That’s a ton of crap to deal with for all of you guys. Just their bottles alone would fill up the whole damned kitchen” she chuckled.

“Ash, we brought Penny last year and she was only five months and you all were fine with it. Why do you think we’re not going to be fine with Dodge and Lily being there?” Niki gave the keeper a hard look. “It’s a little insulting to be honest.”

“Ryan and I can totally help with Drew and Josie, or Dodge and Lily, we don’t care” Whitney offered for the millionth time. “Remember how much fun Drew had on the pontoon boat last year? And Josie will be big enough this year. Why would you deny her a fun vacation with her favorite Auntie Whit?”

“That’s what’s killing me about this whole thing” Ashlyn finally admitted. “I want Ali to take them up but she won’t leave the rest of us. She wants us all to stay together, especially for a vacation.”

“Ummm, hellooooooo?!” Niki nudged her shoulder. “You can all come on vacation and be together. All you have to do is say yes.”

“Oh, and Syd said to tell Ali that she’ll come up and help her pack and they’ll get it all done in no time. So you can’t use that as an excuse either” Whitney giggled.

The three friends eventually went back into the house and, before too long, were talking to Ali about it. Ashlyn was quiet because she didn’t want to influence her wife. That told the brunette already that she wanted to do it. It would be a pain to schlep everything that the twins would need all the way up there and get it all set up only to have to schlep it all back home again after 7 days. But, Drew and Josie and Meg would have another wonderful week on the lake with the best friends anybody could ever ask for. That’s ultimately what the decision came down to and the Kriegers were officially back in for the vacation.

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Meg came up for the whole month of August again and fit right back into the family as she always seemed to. She had turned 11 years old in March and was officially a tween now. Her moodiness hadn’t become too much of a problem yet, she was only 11 and her hormones didn’t seem to have overtaken her entirely yet. Meg was still a good girl who rarely got into trouble. She was patient, for the most part, with the younger kids, only losing her temper if they woke her up early in the morning or touched her stuff. She had learned two years ago to keep anything she didn’t want Drew to grab up high and out of his reach. Now Josie was even grabbier than he had been so Meg had to be extra careful. The littler redhead watched the bigger redhead like a hawk and wanted to do everything Meg did and go everywhere Meg went. There were plenty of times when the 11-year old let the 26-month old sit with her and ‘help’ her with whatever she was doing. Sometimes Meg played with her baby half-sister like a doll, changing her outfits and doing her hair for her. It was pretty cute. Other
times Meg got right down on the floor with Josie and joined her in whatever she was doing – playing blocks, doing a wooden puzzle, playing with her toys or stuffed animals. Josie’s favorite thing to do was to draw or color and Meg was happy to sit with her and do some of her own artwork. Of course, there were times when Josie got excited and added her own art to whatever Meg had been working on which sent the older girl into a fit of anger. Luckily, the anger usually subsided into frustration pretty quickly and there were never any huge problems.

“You know she’s going to do that Meggie” Ashlyn would explain as she listened to the girl complain. Often times she would be comforting a crying Josie at the same time after Meg had gotten up and stomped off in anger. “If it turns into something you really like and want to keep special then get up and work on it out of her reach. Otherwise you’re just going to have to deal with the collaboration.”

Josie used to have eyes only for her big brother Drew. But her first big crush had been on Koty. And now, this summer, she seemed to be focusing on Meg. And Josie wasn’t the only one. Cassius Dwyer, who would turn 6 years old in September, had fallen madly in love with little miss Meg and Sydney thought it was the most adorable thing in the world. Not only did he follow her around like Josie did, but he would act all shy whenever Meg looked at him or talked to him. Thankfully she was still too young to think it was anything other than weird when the little boy acted so strangely around her. It never occurred to her that it was a crush. Ashlyn was happy that it seemed Meg hadn’t really thought much about boys yet. She had been nervous when Hannah called her in April to discuss the topic of sex with Ashlyn as it pertained to little Meg.

“Why are we even talking about this?” Ashlyn wondered out loud after several minutes of Hannah explaining how she had been talking to Meg about sex over the past year or so. “She’s eleven for Christ’s sake.”

“First of all, you’re supposed to talk to them about sex all along, not just spring it on them once they hit puberty or get their period for the first time. You know that Ash, we talked about that a long time ago” Hannah commented with an exasperated sigh.

She was right and the keeper knew it. She remembered answering basic questions that the curious 4-year old had asked her and then she remembered hearing Hannah stumble through an awkward explanation of what sex was to an 8-year old Meg during one of their Facetime chats. ‘Oh, um, well, sex is when a man puts his penis inside a woman’s vagina. It’s only for adults who really love each other.’ Ashlyn had been stunned to hear the little girl ask the question in the first place. But she had also been very impressed with the way Hannah handled it. The keeper would have preferred a less heterosexual explanation but she understood the need to keep it basic and simple at that age. Hannah had explained that to her as well after reading some books about how to talk to your kids about sex. Ashlyn knew her ex wanted to die and crawl into a hole, but she sucked it up and gave her daughter a very basic, but honest explanation without making Meg feel embarrassed about asking the question in the first place. Hannah had also made sure to have a few books about sex around the house that Meg could look at and read on her own or with her mom if she wanted to. They were age appropriate and designed specifically to help kids figure out how to talk about sex and ask about sex and learn about what their own bodies were going to be doing once puberty hit.

“You’re right” Ashlyn blew out a breath. “So where are we now?”

“Well Tiff’s older sister is 14 now and has apparently been telling the girls things about getting their period and how to make boys like you more and, of course, sex” Hannah brought the keeper up to speed during that April phone call. “So, if she brings anything up you need to take advantage and talk to her about it so we can make sure she’s got the right information. Lord knows what Tiff’s sister has told them…”
“But at 14 there’s no way she knows what she’s talking about” Ashlyn finished for her.

“Exactly.”

That August, when Meg seemed to be clueless about Cash’s little crush, Ashlyn was relieved and let herself go back to believing her little girl was still just an innocent little girl. What she was forgetting was that Meg watched tv and movies and listened to music and saw and read things online. She had lots of pieces of information but wasn’t sure how any of them fit together. The keeper made a point to watch some of Meg’s tv shows with her and she had been shocked to hear some of the teenage characters talking with their friends about ‘going all the way’ and using sex to try and keep their boyfriends interested and faithful. Ashlyn hated the whole idea of Meg even thinking about sex but she wasn’t stupid. She knew it was inevitable. The blonde loved kids and she loved sex but she never ever wanted the two to meet. So talking to Meg about sex was probably one of the most painful things she had ever done.

It had happened towards the end of the month when the little girl must have been feeling more comfortable than ever with her step-moms. Ali and Ashlyn were lying on the couch in the living room watching a show together. It was late, almost 10pm, and they had tucked everybody into bed two hours ago. Even Meg still had a 9pm bedtime. They had started the show when Ashlyn had come down after reading one of Meg’s summer reading list books with her, but had both gotten distracted by each other’s body as they snuggled together on the couch. Some sweet kisses had turned into some soft caresses and then into some more heated kisses. They knew they wouldn’t get too carried away because they had to go feed the twins at 10pm so they just decided to enjoy their little make-out session for what it was. There was no way anybody’s clothes were coming off. It got pretty heated as they were stretched out together on the couch, their heads up near the ‘L’ bend and their legs down near the recliner and the doorway to the front hall and the foot of the front stairs. Ashlyn had her back to the back of the couch and was tilted to her left side a bit, with her right leg bent up at the knee against the back of the couch. Ali was flat on her back but pressed up close to Ashlyn’s body. They were both fully clothed but the keeper had pushed her wife’s tank top and bra up above her breasts so her whole chest and stomach were exposed. Ashlyn had her right hand working on Ali’s left breast while her mouth sucked on Ali’s right nipple. The brunette, meanwhile, had her right hand on Ashlyn’s crotch, on top of her sweatpants, teasing her and stroking her and trying to fight the overwhelming urge to go further. They were both moaning and sighing and whispering to each other. Ali’s head was back against the couch with a look of rising pleasure plastered across it. It was no surprise that they didn’t hear the young girl come down the front stairs and turn into the living room when she saw the tv on. She watched the tv for a second and then, hearing and feeling something she had never heard or felt there before, turned her attention to the couch. She was standing just inside the doorway from the front stairs and she had a perfect view, right up between their legs, of everything that was going on.

“Mmmmmmm” Ashlyn hummed against the soft flesh of her wife’s breast while she squeezed the other nipple between her thumb and forefinger.

“Oh, yeah...mnmnmnmnm...” Ali replied with her eyes closed.

Their bodies were both moving slowly and their breathing was heavy. The brunette was seriously considering putting her fingers inside her keeper and opened her eyes to try and look at the clock on the cable box by the tv to see if she had enough time.

“Oh my God” she said quietly as she moved her hand back from Ashlyn’s crotch and pulled her shirt back down over her chest with her other hand.

“We still have time...” the blonde purred as she brought her lips to Ali’s neck after having the tank
top block the breast she had just been sucking on.

“Ashlyn” Ali spoke quietly and firmly and sat up, scooting back so her back was against the back of the other half of the couch.

“What?” the keeper looked at her wife and realized something was wrong. She followed the cinnamon eyes and felt her heart stop when she saw Meg standing there watching them. “Hi, hi Meg” she choked out as she sat up and put her feet on the floor in front of her, ready to get up and take care of whatever the redhead needed. “Are you ok? Why are you out of bed honey?” she asked evenly, trying to hide her mortification and not freak the kid out.

“What are you doing?” her small, curious voice asked softly.

Ali was dying a thousand deaths. She couldn’t decide what to do with her bra so she just left it where it was, sitting stupidly and obviously above her breasts, most of it sticking out of the neck of her tank top. She could not bring herself to look at sweet little Meg.

“Oh, um, ahh...” Ashlyn stammered as her brain tried to do a complete 180 and forget about fucking her wife and try hard to think of what to say to her 11-year old step-daughter. “We’re having some adult time. And I’m sorry. We should have gone to our bedroom for privacy, but we thought everybody was asleep” she answered, speaking slowly but clearly and somehow finding the courage to look Meg in the eye and smile awkwardly.

Nobody said anything for a minute and all Ashlyn could hear was the blood pounding in her ears as both her heart and mind raced.

Meg looked down shyly, and then turned her head to look at the tv before moving her eyes back to the two women on the couch.

“Meg are you ok? What did you come downstairs for sweetie?” Ali tried to figure out what the girl had needed in the first place.

“Um, I forget” she blushed and looked down again.

“That’s ok” Ashlyn smiled at her, a real smile, touched by her cuteness. “But you’re ok? You’re not hurt or anything? You didn’t have a bad dream?”

“No” she shook her head and then looked up shyly. “Were you having sex?”

“No Meg” the blonde replied. “We weren’t having sex. But we shouldn’t have been having our adult time here in the living room. I’m sorry.”

Ali reached forward and put her hand on Ashlyn’s shoulder and patted it reassuringly.

“I’m sorry too sweetheart” the brunette added, giving her step-daughter a warm smile.

“But, what was that if it wasn’t...sex?” she asked in her small voice again. “Was that...a blow job?”

Miraculously, both women managed not to laugh at the achingly sweet and innocent question. There was a pause and Meg shifted her weight on her feet as she stood there nervously waiting for the answer.

“No” Ashlyn blushed, closed her eyes and sighed heavily.

Meg misinterpreted Ashlyn’s discomfort for anger or disappointment in her and her bottom lip started to tremble. The keeper didn’t see it because her eyes were still closed as she tried to prepare herself for the coming conversation.
“Oh Meg, it’s ok” Ali jumped in and reached for the girl, sticking her arm out from her place on the couch. “Ashlyn’s just embarrassed because that wasn’t something we want to share with anybody else” she blushed herself. “That was private, just between the two of us” she motioned between she and her wife who had opened her eyes and turned her attention back to the little girl. “But you didn’t do anything wrong honey. We should have gone to our bedroom and closed the door.”

Meg had started to walk towards the brunette when she reached out her hand, and she moved a little quicker once Ali had reassured her that she hadn’t done anything wrong.

“Here, come sit with us for a few minutes and we can talk about it” the keeper smiled and patted the couch between them. The redhead sat down and looked from one woman to the other, waiting for whatever was going to happen next. “We weren’t having sex honey. We were kissing like we do in private, when it’s just the two of us and nobody else is around.”

“But you weren’t kissing” Meg scrunched her face up in confusion and then looked down again.

Ashlyn looked over her red head at Ali and they exchanged an anxious look. She couldn’t argue the point. Kissing, to Meg, meant lip to lip kissing. And they had not been doing that. The brunette, pulling her bra back down into place as quickly and discreetly as she could, quirked her eyebrow to urge her wife on.

“Meg, sex is something that grown-ups do when they really love each other. And it can be hard to understand when you’re a kid. I’m happy to answer any questions you have, but you might not understand everything. But you will one day when you get older.”

Everybody was quiet for a couple of minutes, just breathing and thinking.

“Are you sure that wasn’t a blow job?” Meg asked and blushed again. “Tiff says that’s when you use your mouth to have sex.”

“No, we were kissing” Ashlyn tried again. “But I was kissing Ali’s breast instead of her lips.”

Meg looked at Ali for confirmation and the brunette, who had hoped to stay out of this whole conversation if possible, felt like she had to participate. She had always told Meg she would answer her questions honestly, and she always had. About breastfeeding and gender identity and Ashlyn’s clothes and what makes a family. She couldn’t stop now.

“How does Tiff know about blow jobs?” Ali asked conversationally, surprising herself at how normal her voice sounded.

“Her sister told her about them.”

“Oh, ok” Ali nodded and tried to keep her voice steady. “Well, a blow job is part of oral sex and that just means that you use your mouth to have sex. Usually a woman gives a man a blow job with her mouth on his penis.”

“On his penis?!” she yelped, shocked and disgusted in equal measure as her eyes went wide and her eyebrows went up into her hairline. “Ew, that’s gross.”

“That’s what I was talking about honey” Ashlyn put her arm around her shoulders and squeezed her. “You’re too young to understand a lot of this so don’t feel bad if it doesn’t make sense right now.”

Meg’s face stayed shocked for a several seconds and then it changed to confusion again as her brain tried to process the new information.
“Hey, how do you have sex if you both don’t have a penis?” she tilted her head to the side and looked at Ali again, sensing she was going to be the one with the answers tonight.

“What do you think sex is again Meg? I know you’ve talked a lot about it with your mom, but I don’t know what she told you” Ali asked.

She really did know, but she wanted to hear what the girl said. Maybe she had learned more from Tiff than they realized.

“Mom said sex is when a man puts his penis into a woman’s vangina” she answered, adorably mispronouncing vagina as she did so. “Tiff’s sister says sex is when you have a...a...nor-cashum.”

Ali looked at her wife’s beet red face and had to bite her tongue hard not to laugh at both she and Meg.

“You want to take this one Ash?” she asked as seriously as she could, winking at her wife when Meg looked away.

“No, um, I, ah...I think you’re doing great honey” she nodded and squeezed Meg’s shoulders again, “you both are.”

“Did your mom tell you anything about when two women have sex?” Ali asked the little girl.

“No” Meg squinted as she tried to remember. “I asked her once about it, after you had Josie.”

“That must have been confusing for you” Ali nodded thoughtfully at the girl and remembered being grateful she hadn’t had to explain artificial insemination to the 9-year old two years ago. “What did she say?”

“She said I should ask you guys when I was ready to know about it” she answered simply, shrugged her shoulders and looked up at Ashlyn.

“Thank you Hannah...” Ali muttered under her breath.

The keeper took a deep breath, steeled her nerves and dove in. She couldn’t believe she was having this conversation with sweet little Meg but she would rather have her learn the truth from her than hear who knows what from Tiff’s hormonal, misinformed sister.

“There is no penis when two women have sex, you’re absolutely right. So we use our mouths and our fingers instead” the blonde was happy she had gotten the words out but her relief only lasted a minute before the smart little girl was asking another question.

“Is that why you had your hand on her...vangina?” she looked earnestly at Ali, trying to understand.

Ali’s face went almost as pale as Ashlyn’s did when they heard that one. God, how much had she seen? What had Ali done with her hand, exactly? Neither of them said anything for a couple of minutes and Meg started to get uncomfortable.

“It’s a good question” Ali started before she was really ready. But she didn’t want Meg to feel bad. “Ummm...”

“Do they do the bases anymore?” Ashlyn asked no-one in particular.

“What’s that?” came the inquisitive voice.

Ali shrugged her shoulders when the two women looked at each other.
“The bases, like in baseball or softball” the keeper explained. “Sometimes people, younger people usually, use the bases to talk about the different parts of the build-up to sex.”

Meg’s little face looked so confused as she tried hard to understand.

“When she says the build-up to sex she means that people don’t just start having sex” Ali snapped her fingers, “like that. They start up with kissing and then they take their time and enjoy that and some other things before they become ready to have sex.”

“Sometimes it’s called foreplay” Ashlyn offered, knowing it was a common term that Meg would hear sooner rather than later on tv if nowhere else. “And, technically, that’s what we were doing tonight” she blushed furiously.

“So the bases are how you describe some of the parts of...foreplay and sex” Ali couldn’t believe this was how their night was going down. “First base is kissing. And if you really like someone a lot you might want to kiss them a lot and that’s called making out.”

“Oh yeah, Tiff says that’s when you use your tongue when you kiss” she made another disgusted face at the thought.

“Ok, well, Tiff’s right on this one” Ashlyn chuckled softly. “I’m not laughing at you honey” she clarified quickly. “You just made a cute face, that’s all.”

“Second base is when you touch each other from the waist up” Ali kept moving along, hoping to just get through it without too many extra questions. Unfortunately, Meg’s face showed nothing but confusion again. “Umm...sometimes, when you’re much older, it feels good to have somebody touch your body...but only if you give them permission to” she added quickly.

“Oh, like your boobies?”

“Yes. Like your boobies” Ashlyn nodded.

“Is that why you were kissing Ali’s booby?”

“Yes” Ashlyn closed her eyes for a quick second as another wave of embarrassment washed over her.

“And it feels good?” she cocked her head and looked at the brunette, again for confirmation.

“Yes, it does” Ali blushed some more.

“Third base is when you touch each other below the waist” the keeper tried to push on through, “because that feels good too.”

“That’s why I had my hand...where it was” Ali swallowed hard.

“And then Home base is when you have sex” Ashlyn finished the tutorial on the bases and squeezed little Meg again. “Does that make any sense at all?”

“Ummm, kind of. I guess” Meg shrugged.

“It’s ok if it doesn’t right now baby girl” the blonde spoke softly. “One day when you’re older it will all make sense. And that’s partly how you know you might be ready to have sex. If it doesn’t gross you out and if all of that makes sense, then, if you are an adult and you really love the other person, you might be ready to have sex.”
They spent another fifteen or twenty minutes answering some other basic questions and then made sure the little girl knew she could come and ask them any other questions any time. As Ashlyn tucked her into bed again they hugged and said goodnights and I love yous. When Ashlyn stood up to leave the room Meg spoke again.

“I think penises are gross” she said, matter-of-factly as she rolled onto her side facing the blonde.

“And that’s ok for you to think that” Ashlyn reassured her with a tender smile. “You may change your mind some day when you get older” she shrugged her shoulders. “Or you may not. It’s ok either way.”

When they were safely in their bed an hour later, Ashlyn and Ali giggled and blushed and relived the whole gory scene from the living room. They praised each other for their bravery and honesty and for making sure Meg felt safe talking to them about sex at all. Ashlyn knew she would have to call Hannah and tell her all about it. She also knew she would get an earful, deservedly so, from her ex about being so careless.

“You know, the modern bases are different now” Ali got into her little spoon position and pulled her wife’s hand across her body and up to her chest where she held it in her own.

“Really?” Ashlyn, the big spoon that night, asked from behind her.

“I would not joke about this. Especially not tonight” she chuckled. “I looked it up real quick while I was feeding Dodge” she explained.

“Well what are they? How bad did we fuck it up?”

“It said that everything above the waist was now part of first base, hands and mouths. Second base is hands below the waist – hand jobs and fingering. Third base is oral below the waist. Home base is the same, thank God” she giggled. “Oh, and there’s a dugout now” she paused. “Anal sex.”

“Wow. The world has changed so much” the keeper sighed heavily.

“But so have the kids” Ali offered. “And we just have to be there for them to help them figure it all out. That’s the job.”

“I know. I know” she agreed and kissed her beautiful brunette’s neck. They were both quiet for a few minutes, minds still racing from the stressful conversation earlier. In all honesty, Ashlyn was disappointed that they had been interrupted. She had been sure she was going to get laid after the 10pm feeding. But now it didn’t seem that way at all.

“It’s just that I’m kind of bummed I only got to first base with you tonight” she teased and kissed Ali’s neck again, this time with a little nibble.

“Yeah, well, that’s going to have to do for a while” Ali groaned. “I won’t be able to have sex without thinking of Meg for a loooooooong time.”

“How long are we talking about?” Ashlyn asked as she moved her lips up Ali’s neck and to her ear. The keeper traced the edge of her outer ear with the tip of her tongue, making the brunette sigh and smile. “Like, minutes or hours or...”

“Like...days babe” Ali chuckled and drew in a sharp breath when she felt her wife’s mouth on her earlobe, nibbling and sucking.

Undeterred by her reply, Ashlyn moved her right hand a little bit and tried to get to Ali’s breast but the brunette’s hand was in the way. She kept moving it from one breast to the other, blocking the keeper each time she tried to get to one of her favorite body parts until they were both giggling.
“Boob blocker” Ashlyn teased and moved her hand to tickle Ali’s side, making her squeal and flail around.

“No...” she giggled as she moved to her back and used her arms to defend herself from the tickling. “Ok, maybe it’s hours, not days” she gasped out around more giggles as her keeper continued to tickle her.

“Oh really?” the blonde smirked and kept tickling, occasionally moving a hand down to the crotch of Ali’s pajama pants.

“No, I was wrong” Ali panted out. “It’s minutes, definitely minutes...” she grinned up at her attacker and then bit her bottom lip and moaned when Ashlyn’s hand stayed between her legs.

The keeper bent her head down and kissed around the brunette’s sleep tank covered breasts, taking her time and alternating the pressure from light to heavy to medium. She avoided the nipples as she slowly started to drag her fingertips down past Ali’s entrance, still on the outside of the cotton cloth, circling it a few times and then gently tapping at her clit.

“Jesus...” Ali breathed out and closed her eyes as her nipples hardened and her pulse picked up.

“No, it’s Ashlyn” the blonde purred seductively as she moved her nose across each erect nipple, nudging and teasing them both to stiffen them even more. The keeper brought their lips together in a slow, sultry, passionate kiss as her fingers kept teasing below the waist. After a few minutes, she suddenly stopped, removed her hand from between Ali’s legs and flopped back onto her side of the bed. “Too bad we have to wait a few days...”

“You big jerk” Ali laughed, got up on her elbow and smacked her joker of a wife on her bicep.

“Hey” Ashlyn chuckled. “Just honoring your request sugarplum” she grinned and her dimple appeared as she settled back with her head on her own pillow.

Ali rolled over, straddled her wife’s hips and pulled her sleep tank up and over her head, exposing her beautiful breasts and their stiff nipples. She would have loved to play with Ashlyn’s breasts but they were still off-limits. Such a fucking waste. Instead she played with her own as she started to grind her wet center against her wife’s mound with a moan.

“Minutes...I said minutes...” she mumbled again as she felt Ashlyn’s hands on her hips, guiding her movements as she started to climb. "Fuck..Ash..."

Chapter End Notes

I’m afraid to say anything about Ali playing tonight. I can’t imagine her sitting for all three games of the Tournament...but then I remember Jill fucking Ellis sat her in the last game of the SheBelieves Cup this Spring in her own home stadium that she had never played in before (she was injured the other times the team played at RFK) in front of her family and friends. And then I realize that if there’s a way to grind my warrior princess down Jill will find it. So I will continue to hope for the best for my baby. She deserves so much better than this shitty treatment.

My other question is what the heck is Kyle doing in the hospital? Anybody know? He had a spinal tap on Tuesday and Deb Deb was with him yesterday. Hope he’s ok.
September brought the return of many things and the brand new beginnings of others. Ali went back to work part-time and spent the mornings at the office three days a week, working from home the other two days. Drew started nursery school which was a big change for him. He was a big, almost 4-1/2 year old who didn’t nap any more and was able to wipe his own bum after using the potty. That meant he qualified for nursery school. They weren’t sure he was going to meet the wiping his own bum criteria. That came right down to the wire. It finally, in early August, took a little bit of sibling rivalry motivation to get him to master the skill.

“You don’t want to be stuck at day care with Josie and all the other little kids anymore do you?” Ashlyn asked her son one morning while they were at the beach. They were sitting side by side in the surf as the waves rolled up their legs. “I thought you were a big boy now?”

It broke her heart to say those words to Drew because the last thing she wanted was for him to be a big boy. She didn’t want him to get any older. The tender-hearted keeper was already starting to struggle with letting her children get bigger and bigger until they eventually didn’t need their mothers at all anymore. But, Ashlyn knew it was important for kids Drew’s age to keep pace with their peers. Drew was smart and she didn’t want him to be kept back or held back in school just because he didn’t want to wipe his own bum.

“Well, do you think it’ll work?” Ali had asked her wife the evening before as they discussed the tactic.

“I have no idea” Ashlyn shook her head. “But we’ve gotta try something.”

“I think it could work” Deb nodded her head. “He’s always reminding Josie of the things she can’t do yet because she’s so little...”

“Right” Ashlyn chimed in. “I think it’ll drive him nuts to think he’ll have to stay behind with the little kids.”

“Well, I know I would have done anything to be able to keep up with Kyle when I was a kid” Ali chuckled. “Maybe it works the other way too. Maybe he’ll do anything to be able to stay ahead of Josie.”

That morning at the beach would prove to be the turning point. After a long couple of minutes where the thoughtful boy really seemed to be contemplating his two options, he finally spoke.

“I am a big boy mama” he stuck his little jaw out as the belief in his own words radiated through his small body. “But...I don’t like to wipe my bum.”

“Oh, ok, I see” she replied thoughtfully as he watched her face carefully for her reaction. “But big boys wipe their own bums. So how can you be a big boy and not do it?”

“All big boys do it?” he asked, squinting at the sun as he looked up at her pretty face.

“They sure do” the keeper stated definitively. “I checked with everybody. Uncle Kyle said so, and so did Uncle Chris and Papa...I asked all the big boys I know, even Cash.”

“Cash wipes his bum too?”

“He sure does” she confirmed with a nod. “He’s been doing it for two whole years now” she
admitted conspiratorially and stifled a chuckle as Drew opened his mouth in wonder.

“Two years?”

“Yep. He started before he went to nursery school too. Just like you...well, just like you would have started nursery school next month.”

“No school if I don’t wipe my bum?”

“That’s right. Sorry buddy. Those are the rules” she dropped her head sadly for a few seconds. “But, hey, just think of all the fun you can have at daycare with Josie and...what’s that little boy’s name who cries every time it rains?”

“Who?” he looked confused.

“You know, the little kid in daycare who doesn’t like the water. He cries if he gets wet. The teacher has to use hand wipes for him all the time because he won’t wash his hands in the sink...”

“Jimmy, that’s Jimmy” Drew clarified and was quiet.

“That’s right. Well I’ll bet you’ll have a whole lot of fun at daycare this year with Josie and Jimmy. Right?” she felt awful as she watched worry crease her son’s face as he stared out at the ocean.

Ashlyn had played all of her cards. She had laid it on thick and she prayed that it would work because she had nothing left. She felt horrible and manipulative and mean. Ali had offered to have this talk with their boy but the keeper thought it would work better with the two of them on one of their mama and Drew beach trips.

“Mama?” his little voice asked after a few minutes of splashing his hands in the water at his sides.

“Yeah bud?”

“I don’t like to wipe my bum...cuz it’s hard.”

“Sure it’s hard to do at first. Just like everything. But how did you get better at using the potty in the first place?”

“How?” he asked sweetly.

“No, you tell me. How did you get better at swimming and at boogie boarding and at riding your trike?” she tried again.

“How mama?” he asked, getting a little frustrated.

“By practicing.”

“Oh, yeah” he laughed.

“You only get good at doing something if you practice doing it, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well the same thing will happen with wiping your bum. I promise. The more times you do it the better you will get at doing it. And, before you know it, you’ll be really good at it and it will be easy.”
“How long?”

“I don’t know little man. But you’re smart and coordinated and I bet you can learn how to wipe your bum good before we even leave for vacation at the lake. How cool would that be to go and stay in the big house again with everybody and be able to wipe your own bum?”

“Cool!” he grinned at her.

Ashlyn desperately hoped he would indeed be able to master it in 2-1/2 weeks. How long could it take?

“Yeah?” she quirked an eyebrow at him.

“Yeah mama. I can do it!”

“That’s my boy” she leaned over and hugged him. “My good, big boy.”

September also marked Ashlyn’s return to some Breakers duties. Her ambassador role was put on hold while she had her maternity leave. Everybody who would have been excited to see and meet Ashlyn Harris at a local event knew she had just given birth to twins so they all understood. All the Breakers wanted was for the keeper to start coming to the home games again, if she could. They offered to pick her up and drive her home if driving was an issue for her. Truthfully, both Ali and Ashlyn were eager to start going to the games again. There were three home games in September. Saturday the 9th, the 23rd and the 30th which was the final game of the regular season. The league had changed most of the start times from 3pm to 6pm because of the extreme heat in many of the stadiums across the country. Some of the really hot spots, like Houston, Orlando and Atlanta, had 7pm or 8pm starts sometimes. If Lifetime TV was airing the game then they stuck to the 6pm kickoff regardless, but, thankfully, the schedulers had learned from their past mistakes. Instead of planning to air a game from Orlando in August at 6pm, they tried to schedule the broadcast dates better. They did home games in Houston, Orlando and Atlanta in April and May when it was a little bit cooler. They saved the hot August dates for the more Northern stadiums like Boston, Minnesota and Vancouver. It wasn’t perfect, and it didn’t happen every time, but the NWSL had gotten better about it.

Ashlyn and Ali took the twins to the first game in September. The babies were almost four months old and cute as could be. The moms and their new babies made all the highlight reels and social media when they posed for and waved at the cameras, proudly showing off their precious new additions to the family. The fans at the game were terrific. When the jumbotron finally found the Kriegers the stadium erupted. The cheering was so loud that the players actually paused on the pitch, wondering what was going on. They brought all four kids to the last two games and had a really fun time, for the most part. It was hard to pay any attention to the game when you were trying to make sure Drew and Josie ate something not terrible for dinner and keep all four kids out of trouble and in the suite. The keeper nursed Lily inside the privacy of the suite at the first game but she decided to do it more publicly and sit in the outdoor seats to do it for the last two games. She had garnered a lot of attention for the photograph of her breastfeeding Lily during the WWC back in June and she had been contacted by different women’s groups and breastfeeding groups because of it. Ashlyn hadn’t really thought a lot about it before, but she was happy to support and promote breastfeeding. It had never occurred to her that it was something that needed a boost of support. She decided that the least she could do, was to not hide what she was doing while she was breastfeeding. She would always be discreet about it, but if she was out somewhere and needed to feed her baby she was going to do it out in the open if at all possible.

The good news for the Breakers was that they had made the playoffs that year. They finished in fourth place in the table, behind Orlando, LA and Kansas City. Ashlyn was scheduled to join the
Lifetime TV coverage of the two games for Championship week in October again. This year Championship Week was in LA which was remarkably inconvenient for the Kriegers. But they would find a way to make it work, they always did.

The other big event in September was the twins’ christening and baptism ceremony on the 17th. Ashlyn knew she and Ali weren’t going to be having any more children and she really wanted her brother and his family to come up for the final christening. But she also knew it was expensive as fuck for them to make the trip. She felt terrible asking them and she knew she couldn’t offer to pay for their flights without offending them. So she didn’t offer. She just flat out told them all that that’s what she was doing when she got everybody, Chris & Beth, Mike, Tammye & Carol, on the same Facetime call at Chris’ house back at the end of July when they scheduled the christening.

“I know this makes you uncomfortable and I’m sorry” the keeper tried to explain after hearing the surprise and awkwardness in their voices and seeing the embarrassed looks on their faces. “But let’s face it, this is the last christening and baptism of this generation. I want you all to be here and it’s my own damned fault for moving so far away...but this is the only way I know how to make it happen.” She paused in case somebody else wanted to say something. But, when two minutes went by without any other comments, she continued. “So you can be mad at me if you want. But I’m doing it and I expect you to be here. I’m getting the tickets next week so let me know when and how you want to fly.”

“Thanks Bash” Chris finally said, his face still a little red.

“And everybody can stay at the house. There’s room for all of us” Ashlyn added in a quieter voice. “I love you guys.”

Gram’s christening gown was still safely stored in the closet of the nursery where it had been since Josie wore it two years ago. It would be almost a perfect fit for Dodge, who was just a tiny bit bigger than his twin sister. They were both bigger than Josie had been at their age, which was also when she had been baptized, 4 months. Josie had been so small and hadn’t gained much weight for the first several weeks of her life that the christening gown was much too big for her. But they made it work and she had looked beautiful in it. Tammye had found a christening gown that was similar to Gram’s and bought it in a size that would fit Lily. She had sent it up to Gloucester in August so Ashlyn and Ali could make sure they approved. The keeper let Whitney handle the ship’s bell engraving this time, ever thankful to have such a dedicated and devoted best friend.

“Hey, what are godmother’s for?” the lawyer had quipped.

Whitney even took responsibility for getting it to the church for Pastor Janet to use as the baptismal font again. The two new lines around the bell, above Drew and Josie’s names already engraved, read:

‘Dodge Christopher Krieger – 5/13/23’

And then on top of that:

‘Lilian Isabella Krieger – 5/13/23’

Ashlyn had already made an appointment with Naomi to get her ‘Mary Sarah’ tattoo updated to include the two new names. She had a couple more weeks to decide exactly where she wanted them to go on the schooner.

It was hard to tell who looked prouder that Sunday morning in the church, godparents, grandparents or birth parents. Kyle and Nathan looked so handsome in their suits with big grins on their faces as
they stood up at the front of the church. Kyle held Lily in his strong arms and soothed her when she started to get upset from the water being poured over her head. Nathan was quick with the towel and kept the water out of her eyes, much to everyone’s relief. Lily was the child with the biggest set of lungs on her, by far. That baby could cry louder than any baby in their little group of friends, times two. Ali exhaled the breath she had sucked in and felt Ashlyn squeeze her hand from the seats in the front pew. They shared a quick look of relief and smiled adoringly at each other as Pastor Janet moved on to Dodge. Whitney and Ryan looked like the beautiful couple they were as they finally got their turn to be godparents to a Krieger baby. Whitney held Dodge and the baby boy smiled up at her. His whole attitude and outlook changed once he had started feeding from the bottle. He got bigger and stronger and happier and handsomer. He did indeed look like a little old man when he was born. He looked like he was in a bad mood because he probably was in a bad mood. Both twins had started growing curly blonde hair and no-one was sure of the source. With the sperm donor, surprises like red hair for Josie and blonde hair for the twins were not uncommon. It was hard to go back and figure out the dominant/recessive gene combinations and, honestly, nobody really cared enough to do it. If the twins stayed blonde, then that was great. If their hair gradually turned dirty blonde and then light brown as had happened with both Chris and Ashlyn when they were babies, then that was just great too. The inside joke was that the sperm donor had some mad powerful hair genes that only Drew had been able to fight off. He had Ali and Kyle’s thick, dark brown hair and it hadn’t changed one bit in his entire life.

Dodge had been so wrapped up in his godmother’s pretty face that he was stunned when the water hit his head. His whole little body froze and then shook for about thirty seconds while his eyes got big and his mouth opened wide. He never made a sound though. Everyone just assumed he had been shocked into silence. Ryan carefully wiped off his head and Whitney kissed his little forehead and told him he was ok and the baby took her at her word and started to breathe normally again. It was a sweet moment in a day that would turn out to be full of them. Ashlyn looked down the pew and took in the sight of her family there for her. Drew was in Papa’s lap and the keeper didn’t think her father had ever looked more proud. She turned her head the other direction and saw little Josie sitting on Koty’s lap in her pretty dress. She was kicking her little leg against his knee and her shoe fell off. Ken bent over and picked it up, carefully undoing the buckle and using both hands to get her foot back into it. It took him a couple of minutes to get it buckled up again but he was patient and persistent and Ashlyn’s heart melted as she watched the exchange.

Then her eyes landed on sweet Meg’s dark red curls. The girl had asked if she could come to the christening when she heard Ashlyn and Ali and Whitney talking about it one day on their New Hampshire lake vacation. She hadn’t been to either of the other christenings or to any other family holidays for that matter. As she was getting older she started to become aware of the life of her other family when she wasn’t there and she started showing signs of wanting to be a part of it. Ashlyn and Hannah had talked it over and they agreed, especially since it was the last christening that would happen, that Meg could come for the weekend and fly home on Monday. Normally they wouldn’t let her miss a school day, especially now that she was in middle school, but it was the end of an era so they made an exception. The only problem with Meg’s visit was that they had promised her room to Chris and Beth so sweet little Meg ended up sleeping in the twin bed in Josie’s room. She wasn’t wild about sharing a room with her 27-month old step-sister but she did like being back in that bed again. It was the bed she used to sleep in back when the nursery had been her room, before Drew was born. Meg sat there in the church between Deb and Tammye with her head leaning against Deb’s shoulder and her hand in Tammye’s lap. Ashlyn watched her mother softly rub the back of Meg’s hand with her thumb as they all grinned up at the babies.

It was another wonderful christening and all of their closest friends and family came. After church they all gathered at the big old house for lunch and whatever else anybody felt like doing for the afternoon. After Ali and Ashlyn had two kids they had become much more laid back about hosting
things. They both liked to make their guests feel comfortable and they made sure everybody had what they needed. But they no longer felt the need to impress anybody. Now that they had four children they considered it a successful gathering if there was no bloodshed and all the guests managed to leave the house without being puked on. The Crosses and Dwyers were there as were most of Ali and Ashlyn’s other friends, even the ones without children yet. The Breakers had an away game so none of them could make it but many of the Boston Pride players were in town for training camp and preseason so they were all there in fine form. Sarah and Erin, the Donaldsons from next door, and old Mrs. Riley even made it with some help from one of her daughters. Even the Scott Kriegers were there. Not all of them. Rachael and Vivian had come with their husbands and kids and Scott and Becky were there as well. It slowly dawned on Ali that this was the first time Aunt Becky and Meg had been at the same place since Kyle’s wedding two years ago.

“Just, make sure Meg’s the reason you do whatever it is you’re going to do” Ashlyn had grabbed her wife’s arm before she started to walk away. They were upstairs putting the twins down for a nap as soon as they got home from church and Ali was hurrying to get back downstairs to help the grandma brigade get lunch set up. “That’s all I’m saying honey.”

“I know babe” Ali gave her a quick peck on the lips and a smile. “I know she’ll never apologize but I just want her to know I haven’t forgotten what she did. And I’m not just going to pretend it didn’t happen like everybody else anymore.”

“What are you going to do?” Ashlyn looked worried.

“I don’t know, probably nothing” she shrugged and answered honestly. “I won’t start anything but I will definitely finish whatever she starts. And I’m going to tell Meg to just stay away from her if she wants. She doesn’t have to be the polite hostess today, not with Aunt Becky.”

“Oooh, good thinking” the keeper nodded.

A few hours later, people had eaten and relaxed and spread out a bit throughout the house. It was a beautiful mid-September day and a lot of visitors had gone down to the beach. Ali had offered bathing suits and swim diapers to any kid who hadn’t come with one and just as she was about to leave the house to go down to the beach and check on everyone, she saw her mother standing with her hands on her hips and her back to her. She was talking quietly to someone in the corner of the dining room but Ali couldn’t see who it was from her spot in the mudroom. Deb often stood with her hands on her hips, as did Ali, but this wasn’t the friendly hands on hips pose. This was the aggressive, someone’s getting a talking to pose and the brunette was dying to know who had gotten themselves into trouble already. She was running through the possibilities in her mind when she saw her mother turn around and start walking towards her out of the dining room, across the front hall by the bathroom and into the mudroom. Deb winked at her as she turned into the kitchen and Ali was shocked to see Aunt Becky standing in the corner of the dining room. She was red-faced and scowling and Ali quickly turned and continued on her way down to the beach.

It wasn’t for another few hours that Ali saw the fruits of her mother’s labors in action. The Scott Kriegers were saying their goodbyes and Ashlyn, Ali, Meg, Drew and Josie were standing in the mudroom to thank them for coming and hug and kiss them all goodbye. Meg stood in front of Ali and the brunette had her hands on the tops of the girl’s shoulders, protectively.

“Thank you so much for having us” Aunt Becky said as she hugged and kissed Ashlyn. She ruffled Drew’s hair and patted Josie’s cheek as she went down the line. “It was so good to see everybody. Those twins sure are adorable. Won’t they be lucky if they can grow up to be as handsome and beautiful as you two are” she complimented Drew and Josie.

When she got to Ali and Meg she paused, just for a second, and the brunette could feel Ashlyn
holding her breath and tensing up as she watched from four feet away.

“And it’s so wonderful to have the whole family here” she cupped Meg’s cheek and smiled warmly at her. “What a blessing” she finished as she leaned forward and gave Ali a big hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Thank you for making the trip” Ashlyn spoke up when it seemed like Ali was too shocked to say anything in response. “It was great seeing you all. Can’t wait for Thanksgiving.”

“Let’s hope the Patriots can find a way to win without Brady!” Uncle Scott said to Ashlyn from the mudroom door.

“Oh, I wouldn’t bet against them” the keeper grinned, continuing their conversation from earlier in the afternoon. Tom Brady had played until he was 45 years old, just like he said he wanted to do. He retired last year after taking the Patriots to the AFC Championship game, again, but that was as far as they had gone. “We all know better than that!”

Ali knew that Aunt Becky was putting on at least half a show. Maybe she did finally feel bad about her behavior two years ago but the brunette didn’t buy it. This heartfelt display was a direct result of Deb Christopher giving Aunt Becky a piece of her mind earlier in the afternoon and Ali knew it. She was probably the only one in the house who did.

“Thank you so much Aunt Becky” the brunette finally spoke as their hug ended. “We really appreciate that, don’t we Meg?” she squeezed her step-daughter’s shoulders lightly.

“Um, yeah, thank you very much” Meg said to Aunt Becky and gave her a small, confused smile.

Ashlyn came up behind her wife and Meg as they all turned to wave out the mudroom door as the car backed out of the driveway. Drew and Josie had scampered off to find their cousins and friends in the backyard.

“Nice job ladies” the keeper said to Ali and Meg, a long arm around each of them. “Way to take the high road. I’m proud of you both.”

Later that evening, when parents were getting things packed up and loaded into their cars, the various children ran riot through the house for about fifteen chaotic minutes. The grandparents were all out in the backyard trying to stay out of the way. The house was kid-proofed so nobody was too worried, but everyone knew anything could happen. This was exactly why Ashlyn kept the front parlor closed off from the rest of the house. If grown-ups wanted to go and sit in there they were more than welcome to. But if you weren’t old enough or smart enough to operate the kid-proof gates at both entrances to the room, you couldn’t take advantage of it. The keeper and her brother stood in the dining room, side by side with their arms crossed, as they surveyed the mayhem, ready to step in if anybody got too rowdy or if somebody got hurt. They watched different groupings of children literally run circles around the first floor of the house.

Depending on how creative they got, there were short, simple circles they could run, like around the front living room and front hall and mudroom. The other common one was around the big double-sided fireplace in the kitchen and family room. That one got shut down pretty quickly though because there was usually a grown-up cooking or doing something in the kitchen. Those were the two starter level loops. The biggest circle had been Meg’s favorite when she was younger. Ashlyn remembered her running around with the young puppies trailing along behind her six years ago. That circle put the two smaller loops together so you ran from front living room to front hall to dining room to family room, around either side of the fireplace and into the kitchen, to the mudroom and back to the front living room. If you really wanted to stretch your legs and use your lungs that was
the loop for you. The real fun began when you incorporated a figure eight into the loop. The choke point was the part of the front hall, in front of the bathroom, that connected the dining room and the mudroom. Whether you were bravely doing the figure eight run or even if you were just doing one of the two simple loops, you knew you were going to run into other runners there. It was what made it so thrilling. Well, that and the fact that you were ‘running in the house’ which every mother in the history of time had yelled at you not to do. It was that choke point that the Harris siblings had their eyes on from their spot in the dining room.

“Who ya got?” Chris asked as he watched Drew (4-1/4), Cash (6), Johnny (6) and Noah (7-1/2) race around the big loop, wisely avoiding the choke point.

“What do you mean?” his sister replied with a grin as she watched Evan (3-1/4), Lizzy (3-1/2) and Josie (2-1/4) try to keep up. James (22 mos) was just meandering around and doing a lot more standing and watching than running.

“Who’s going to cry first? Who’s going to bleed first? Who’s going to...”

“Break a bone first?” she cocked her head at her brother. “Bro, we’re just going to let them blow off a little steam before they have to get into cars and drive home.”

He rolled his eyes.

“Pussy.”

“Excuse me?” she quirked an eyebrow at him.

“You’re just afraid one of my kids is going to beat one of your kids. I get it” he chuckled as the group made another pass through the big loop.

“Whatever, douche” she nudged him with her elbow.

He knew not to be too rough with her still. He had gotten a tearful, curse-filled reminder when he greeted her Friday night by picking her up and spinning her around. Her breasts were still sore from that.

“Oh, here we go” Chris nodded appreciatively when Josie came through the dining room and cut through the front hall into the choke point. She entered the mudroom just as the bigger boys were getting there and Johnny and Drew put the brakes on, liking her idea, and cut through going the other way. “Now it’s going to get interesting” the big man grinned and nodded his head.

“Leave it to my little one, Josie” Ashlyn smiled.

Five minutes later things had ramped up considerably with half the big boys doing the figure eight in one direction and the other half doing it in the opposite direction. They were trying to time it so they all crashed into the choke point at the same time. The younger group, wisely, stuck to the perimeter loop and tried not to get knocked down by the bigger boys. Lizzy had tried to navigate her way through the choke point and crashed right into Cash. They both went to the ground in a heap and Ashlyn held her breath. Lizzy giggled first but Cassius joined right in. They picked themselves up off the floor and took off again with big smiles on their faces.

“Man, we would have had fun in this house with a bunch of other kids around” Chris said wistfully.

“You’re nuts. No way Grandma Lilian lets us run around in here for even a minute” the keeper laughed and shook her head.
They both cringed as Noah and Johnny slammed into each other. Noah was the oldest but Johnny was the thickest and he seemed to come out of the collision with the least damage. Noah grabbed his shoulder and winced but didn’t cry. He took a minute and then took off again.

“Oooh, thought we had the first crier right there” Chris chuckled.

Almost as soon as he said the words, Evan and Drew ran into each other with a loud smack and both hit the floor. Drew sat up first and rubbed his head with both hands, his face scrunched up and red. Evan took an extra second and then started to cry as he lay there on his back holding his forehead.

“And we have a winner” the big man laughed as he and his sister moved quickly to tend to the two boys and move them into the mudroom, out of the choke point.

“What is going on in here?!’’ Ali’s voice was sharp as she and Sydney came in through the mudroom door.

“They just bumped heads” Chris explained as he picked up Evan and held him in his arms. “They’re fine.”

No sooner had he said this than three kids ran right between Ali and Sydney and Chris and Ashlyn, giggling gleefully as they dodged and darted through the choke point, successfully avoiding the two other kids coming from the other direction. Every single one of them had a big huge grin on their face, even Drew as he stood there in Ashlyn’s grasp waiting to be released back into the game. He had a knot forming on the side of his forehead but it wasn’t quite as big as the one in the middle of Evan’s. Molly, with Penny on her hip, came into the mudroom next and took in the scene.

“Ok...” she said with her eyebrows up to her hairline.

“They bumped heads” Ashlyn told her. “They’re fine.”

Before she could say anything in response the kids came through again, giggling and laughing. It was a little bit like watching Russian roulette – you held your breath and waited for the one time it wasn’t going to be ok. Ashlyn looked nervously at her wife but Ali’s face had focused on Josie who was running through the choke point now, but watching carefully to make sure she didn’t get bowled over. When she thought she was in the clear she turned on the jets and picked up her pace, only to crash into James who was still just kind of wandering around aimlessly. The two toddlers were almost the same size because Josie was so small for her age and they had relatively safely smashed body to body, and not head to head. They ended up on their bums on the floor just inside the dining room and everybody held their breath for a second as the two children looked at each other. Josie giggled and then broke into a big smile which made James laugh along with her.

“Oh thank God” Ali breathed out and bumped shoulders with Sydney, still standing next to her.

They could all hear the kids getting ready to run through again and Ali looked anxiously at her wife. Ashlyn caught the look and put her pinkies in the corners of her mouth and whistled loudly.

“Alright!” she yelled, stepping into the choke point to try and prevent the horde from trampling Josie and James. “That’s enough!”

“Oh everybody had their fun” Chris chimed in, still carrying Evan. “But we’re all done now. Johnny!” he yelled at his son who was not listening. “Stop running in the house right now!”

“Somebody please tell me that you didn’t leave my two children in charge of the rest of the children in here” Tammye chuckled from the mudroom door. “Lord have mercy.”
Ashlyn and Chris just grinned and shrugged as they turned to look at their mother.

“We just wanted to get them tired out for the drive home” the keeper explained with a sheepish look towards her mother and then her own wife. “It was only for a few minutes.”

“Yeah” Chris tried to help. “Nothing’s broken, nobody’s bleeding, only one incident of crying…”

“That’s a minor miracle if you ask me” Tammye laughed. “How come you two caused so much more damage and trouble at our house than these…” she counted quickly, “eight sweet children put together have caused here tonight?”

Both Chris and Ashlyn shrugged their shoulders in the exact same way at the exact same time and all of the grown-ups laughed.

“I’m just surprised you didn’t set up obstacles for them or time them or bet on the outcomes” Tammye chuckled again as her two grown children exchanged a guilty look.

“Oh my God” Ali gasped and stepped towards them so she could pick up James and help Josie to her feet. She was trying to be upset but, honestly, everybody seemed fine and they certainly had enjoyed their fifteen minutes of rambunctious fun. “You guys totally did all of that didn’t you” she narrowed her eyes as she looked at her wife and brother-in-law but she couldn’t keep the mirth out of them.

“No, we didn’t, I swear” Ashlyn defended herself as Ali handed James to her.

“We really didn’t” Chris added as he carried Evan back into the mudroom so Molly could check out the bump on his head.

Ali scooped up her daughter who giggled when her mommy tickled her sides.

“Did you have fun little one?” Ali asked with a kiss to Josie’s cheek.

“Yup. Run fast!”

Ali looked at Sydney who just rolled her eyes with a grin. She looked at Molly who only sighed and smiled.

“I feel like it’s important to point out that it was training sessions just like this one tonight that helped me shape my little sis into the championship-winning, professional athlete she eventually became” Chris boasted with a grin. “So you’re all welcome.”
The Breakers travelled to Orlando to play the Supporters Shield winning Pride in their playoff game on October 7th. Kansas City travelled to Los Angeles for the second playoff game the same day. Boston and LA lost those playoff games and faced each other at the very beginning of Championship Week in the runner-up game. Los Angeles was the host stadium for Championship Week and nobody gave the Breakers much of a chance to win that meaningless game against the host team. But Boston had gone out and done just that. Ashlyn covered the game that first weekend of Championship Week from the sidelines, just as she had done the previous year. At the end of the pregame show, when it was time for all of the soccer commentators and pundits to make their picks for the game, Ashlyn bravely picked Boston to win the match. She took endless ribbing for the duration of the game and was accused of homerism for picking her old club team despite plentiful evidence of the LA Strikers superiority.

“I don’t know what to tell you guys” she laughed when they went back to a live shot of her on the side of the field to get her reaction to all of the crap her colleagues had just heaped on her. “Call it a hunch, call it wishful thinking” she shrugged. “All I can say is that from down here on the pitch, there’s an edge to this Boston team and they seem hungrier than the hosts.”

Sure enough, when the final whistle blew, Boston had beaten LA 3-2. It was a meaningless win but it was a good gut-check game for the young Breakers. Ali and all four kids had flown out to Los Angeles for the week with Ashlyn. Drew was still young enough where it wouldn’t hurt him to miss school so they decided to do it. It would be a fun family adventure. Knight-Harris always sent at least two agents out to Championship Week every year, no matter where it was. Jen Tucker and Paige Dandreo were the usual suspects because the NWSL and MSL were their specialty. Ali had encouraged Whitney to travel with the company so she could visit her family in Southern California at the same time. Ryan was done with his Cannon season and was able to join her as well.

“And I’m not just saying this so you’ll help us with the kids” Ali had laughed as she sat in Whitney’s office early in September. “There are lawyers and paralegals out in LA that I’m sure you want to interview and get a look at. Right?”

“There are, actually” Whitney smiled broadly. “Really.”

“Well good. Then it’s settled.”

Ali also enlisted the help of Ken and Vicki for the trip. Ali and Ashlyn bought their plane tickets for them and the Grandparents helped them out with the kids for the week. It worked out great because Ali was able to attend several of the meetings and do some of the networking that she loved and didn’t always make time for anymore. They rented a small house on the beach, which was way more expensive than it should have been, and made a real vacation out of the trip.
Ashlyn was happy and relaxed as she covered the Championship game from the sidelines the second weekend. This was Orlando’s fourth consecutive trip to the big game. Their first time had been up in Boston when the Breakers beat them in Whitney’s final game. The Pride had gone back the very next year and lost to Chicago. Then the third year, last year, they lost to Los Angeles. It was sort of like Christen Press and the Red Stars not being able to get past Ashlyn and the Breakers for so many years in a row. Since the home team LA Strikers wasn’t in the final game in their home stadium, the fans all cheered for Orlando. Kansas City had won two Championships back in 2014 and 2015 but Orlando had never won the game and, most fans agreed, deserved to win after making it back a record-setting fourth time in a row. They no longer had Marta, the greatest of all time had retired a couple of seasons ago, but they had all of those young players from four seasons ago who had grown into veterans with chips on their shoulders who would do anything to win the big game.

When they finally did win the game, Pride team captain, and game-winning goal scorer, Rachel Hill was the first player that Ashlyn interviewed. The forward was from New Hampshire and had been a star at UConn before being drafted into the NWSL in 2017. She had been involved in the Breakers’ development teams practically her entire life and had always hoped to play in Boston. Ashlyn knew her well and had called on her several times to help with her soccer camps in NH and even in Connecticut.

“Ash!!! We finally did it!!” she yelled as she hugged Ashlyn right after the whistle.

“Yeah you did Rach” Ashlyn hugged her back as the camera rolled. “Congratulations Captain, you’re a Champion now!”

They took a second to catch their breath and then Ashlyn started the official interview, asking all the right questions along with several that no-one would know to ask if they hadn’t seen what the keeper had seen with her experienced eyes.

“How about that knock you took right after the half? It seemed to slow you down a bit but then you picked it up again in about the 60th minute or so” she frowned her concern at the tough competitor. “Tell us what happened.”

“You saw that huh? Oh, you know, it was just a knock. I took a knee to my quad and it just took a little bit to work itself out” she shrugged and smiled. “Once it did I was good” she grinned. “But I was just glad nobody really tested me on it for those ten minutes or so.”

All in all it was a very successful, productive and fun week on the west coast for the whole family. The twins were five months old and were just starting to transition to solid food. They were getting their first taste of the watery porridge that their mothers fed them with little spoons. Dodge loved it and, this time, Lily was the difficult one. In what would go on to be a childhood theme from that point on, Dodge ate like a champ and Lily became an even fussier eater than Drew was. Everyone decided that Dodge was just not a milk guy, that’s why he hadn’t liked breastfeeding and only tolerated the bottle. He liked real food, was the joke.

The other big developments in October were that Drew learned how to ride a big boy bike with training wheels. He had been overcautious and borderline terrified of it at first. But, as always, watching Cash and Noah ride their bikes around helped motivate him to try. He really was a coordinated kid. He wasn’t really big or really strong, but he was agile and coordinated and things like balancing on a bike came easier to him than to some kids. It would only take him until early May for him to master it without needed training wheels at all. And he was doing well in nursery school, making new friends and wiping his own bum like a champ. Well, actually, he was wiping his own bum like a 4-1/2 year old, which wasn’t that well at all. He did his best and did get better the more he did it, but they went through a lot of underwear that Fall.
Josie, not to be outdone by her other siblings’ accomplishments that month, started potty training when they got home from Los Angeles. She had watched Drew do it since she was 5-months old so Ali and Ashlyn weren’t that surprised when she picked it up so quickly. She was very smart and she had a successful example to emulate. She was completely potty trained in just a few weeks. And now that she was a big, potty-trained girl, she needed her big-girl bed and a freshly decorated room. Ashlyn took the lead on that and before Thanksgiving little Josie had her princess room with a princess style bed. The ‘big-kid’ beds weren’t really twin beds, they were smaller than that and no grown-up would fit into one very easily. They were ok for snuggling on and sitting on to read with your child but you didn’t want to spend a whole night in one if you were over 5’ tall. As her moms expected, she had chosen a lot of pink for her room. Ali had been able to talk her into using some white or yellow to help accent all the pink, but it had been a tough sell. Josie had been ready to get out of her crib probably for a month or so before they actually made the change. Both Ali and Ashlyn were worried because she was still, physically, so small. They knew their daughter was resilient and smart and that’s what ultimately swayed them to make the change.

“We had Drew in his big boy bed before Josie was even born” Ali commented. “He was barely 2 years old.”

“Yeah, but he was bigger and we also had no choice” Ashlyn countered. “We needed the nursery.”

“And we’ve waited almost five extra months to get her out of her crib Ash. She’s ready.” Ali finished wiping off the kitchen table, put the dishcloth down near the sink and moved to her wife by the recycling bin at the foot of the backstairs. “I know you’re nervous honey, but she’s ready” she wrapped her arms around the blonde from behind and rested her cheek against Ashlyn’s strong back.

“But what if she falls out of bed and hurts herself?”

“We’ll use the guard rails, just like we did with Drew.”

“But what if she wedges herself down between the mattress and the guard rail, like in that video we watched...”

“Ashlyn” the brunette spoke carefully and calmly. “She’s a smart little girl. I know she can figure it out. But if she does have trouble we’ll take the guard rails off so she can’t get hurt that way.”

“But then she’ll fall out of the bed...”

“Babe, listen” Ali turned her wife around so they were facing each other. She leaned up and kissed her softly on the lips. “It’s time. The chances of her hurting herself falling out of her big-girl bed are a lot lower than the chances of her hurting herself climbing out of her crib.”

“You’re right” Ashlyn sighed heavily and slumped her shoulders. “I just worry about her so much.”

“I know you do and I think it’s really sweet. You’ve always been extra protective of her” she paused for a second, “and I think we both know why. But I’m afraid of holding her back too.”

“She’s just so little” Ashlyn said quietly and looked anxiously into her wife’s cinnamon eyes.

“Yes she is and she’s probably always going to be littler than everybody else her age.” The brunette cupped her wife’s cheek and spoke softly to her. “But size isn’t everything. I was always the smallest one on my soccer team, right up until halfway through high school. And even then I was never big. But I was always twice as tough as everybody else and being small never stopped me from doing anything.” She waited for her wife to say something but realized that she was fighting back tears. “Ash, what’s the matter?”
“Oh God, I just...I don’t know” she shook her head. “It’s so scary, being a parent sometimes. I worry about Drew but I worry ten times as much about Josie. And...and what if I am holding her back?” she sniffled, winning the battle against her tears and taking a breath. “I’d hate to do that to her. That’s the last thing she needs from her parents.”

“Well, we’re in this together sweetheart” Ali smiled at her caring wife. “And I’ll help you find a good balance with her on this ok? I’ve got a history with being small and I’ll let you know, just like I’m doing right now, if I think we’re being too careful with her.”

“Do you promise?”

“I promise babe.”

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Old Mrs. Riley was still ‘helping’ to clean the big old house on Monday and Thursday mornings at 72 years of age. She came and basically supervised the young woman who had taken over for her, after carefully hand-selecting her from the available cleaning staff in her company. Her middle daughter, Jean, had run the business for her since 2020 and did a very good job. The new, younger woman, Marisol, was a hard-working mom of three and, so far, she had done a fine job cleaning the house and both Ali and Ashlyn liked her. Mrs. Riley planned to officially retire, even from Ali and Ashlyn’s house, at the end of the year. Jean and her two sisters were throwing their mom a big retirement party at the end of November and the Kriegers had offered to pay for the food for the event. Jean hadn’t agreed yet but both Ali and Ashlyn hoped she would let them help. Mrs. Riley had become a member of the family over the past eight years and Drew and Josie didn’t know anything but having Mrs. Riley come to visit two mornings a week. For the past two years that’s basically what would happen. She told them stories and listened to their stories, although Ashlyn wasn’t convinced she could hear as well as she used to. Mrs. Riley always gave them a piece of her favorite burnt sugar candy, a Portuguese specialty that she had grown up eating and learned to make herself. The old woman would never be called warm and cuddly, but she enjoyed spending time with the kids and they loved her. Drew, with his ‘r’ problems, couldn’t say her name so he called her ‘Missus’ and it had stuck. That’s what they all called her now. None of them knew how they were going to get along without her presence in their home, especially Ashlyn. It was another link to Grandma Lilian severed. The keeper promised herself that she would keep in touch with Mrs. Riley no matter what.

Sarah and Erin had their first baby the first week of October, two weeks past the due date. Erin gave birth to a healthy baby girl and both moms were beaming in the picture they texted out to their closest family and friends. Ashlyn, older, wiser and more chill about the threat that she had always feared from Sarah, was truly happy that her wife had remained friends with her ex. The keeper had always felt a little inadequate when it came to the architect. Sarah was a catch and Ashlyn knew it. And the tall, buxom professional had things to offer Ali that the blonde did not. That, if she was really being honest with herself, was what had made Ashlyn nervous about Sarah. She had never admitted it to Ali and was glad about that now. Somehow she knew it was just her own insecurities that were painting the architect as a potential threat to her happiness with Ali. Ashlyn had, of course, confessed everything to Whitney which was the only reason she had been able to sit tight and let the friendship develop. Whitney knew just how much Sarah had loved Ali. But, she also knew just how much Ali loved Ashlyn. Every time the topic came up or anytime the keeper started to doubt herself, Whitney simply reminded her that Ali had chosen her. Now, eight years later, Ashlyn was able to enjoy both Sarah and Erin as friends without any of that old worry. She was very grateful.

The Donaldsons, their next door neighbors, continued to be wonderful friends and neighbors. Neil and Julie were about seven years older than Ali and Ashlyn but they were young for their age. That
year, 2023, Julie turned 46 and Neil 47 and their three kids were 16, 12 and 9 years respectively. Justin, the oldest, was a typical teenager – quiet and moody sometimes and then boisterous and rowdy other times. He mowed the Kriegers’ lawn for them and had been doing it for the past five years. As he got older Ali showed him how to do the edging and they increased his pay accordingly. He used their lawnmower and edger and they, of course, kept everything gassed up and in good working order for him. They fully expected Drew to take over the job as soon as he was big enough – 12 years old was when Justin had started and it seemed like a good age to plan on. The moody teen was tall and lanky, like his father, and he liked to play basketball and video games. One of the things he had in common with the two women next door, when he was younger, had been video games. He had an X-Box system instead of a Playstation and Ashlyn was constantly teasing him about it. They would chat about the newest games that were coming out and compare notes on which games they all received for Christmas and their birthdays.

Once Julie and Neil realized that Ashlyn and Ali were nice people they let Justin go over to the big old house to play with the puppies and show the old ladies how to find some of the easter eggs in certain games. Ali and Ashlyn had been the cool neighbors with the puppies before they started having kids of their own. Now they were busier and had less time for video games. But Justin had almost outgrown Ali and Ashlyn too. He was star struck when he saw some of the friends Ashlyn had over to the house. Julian Edelman saw him lurking in the trees that separated the two properties on the other side of the driveway and asked Ashlyn who her stalker was. She laughed and said he was stalking the football star, not her. Julian had made Justin’s day by calling him over and talking with him about skateboarding and basketball and football. Ashlyn took a picture of the two of them that Justin had printed off and framed for his room. Emma was twelve and also tall and lanky like her dad. She was a year older than Meg and they had become friends pretty quickly once Meg began spending more time at the big old house. Emma was a tomboy who loved to do outdoor things, like hiking and camping and fishing, with her dad. Meg was very into sports and a tomboy in her own right. Emma wasn’t very interested in sports, which was too bad because Ashlyn thought she had the build to be a great keeper, but she and Meg taught each other how to do what they loved. It took a few years, but by the time they were eight and nine years old they were thick as thieves when Meg came up for a visit. Once Meg started spending more time at the big old house in the summers they got even closer. Emma wasn’t very interested in sports, which was too bad because Ashlyn thought she had the build to be a great keeper, but she and Meg taught each other how to do what they loved. It took a few years, but by the time they were eight and nine years old they were thick as thieves when Meg came up for a visit. Once Meg started spending more time at the big old house in the summers they got even closer. Emma was almost painfully shy and she didn’t have a lot of friends of her own which explains why she was happy to befriend the stranger from DC who visited once or twice a year. Emma was also the Donaldson child who was allergic to dogs and cats and the reason the animal loving family didn’t have any pets. You could almost see the relief in the little girl when Persey and Fred became the adopted pets of the Donaldsons. She had always felt bad that she was the reason her little sister couldn’t have a dog of her own.

Little Micky was nine years old and a real character. It was almost as if Michaela got all of the extra personality that Justin and Emma seemed to shy away from. She was bubbly and adorable and inquisitive and charming. She was short and round, like her mother, and both Ali and Ashlyn loved her. She had been two years old the Fall that Ali moved in and the happy new couple had literally watched her grow up. Ali was so taken with her and her obvious love for the puppies that she started to buy Micky a little gift from the dogs for her birthday every year. It wasn’t anything huge, just a little book about dogs or maybe a small stuffed animal. Ali would put the colorful giftbag out and hook it on the chainlink fence near the driveway with a birthday card sticking out of the top of the bag. The card and gift were always from Persey and Fred and Micky had been three when that started. Ali and Ashlyn would watch the bag on the fence from the back kitchen window and sure enough, within fifteen minutes of putting it out there, little Micky would come scampering across the driveway with one of her parents following behind to collect it. Julie admitted to the couple that the little girl looked forward to getting that gift from the dogs more than almost anything else on her
It had lasted right up until that very year, her ninth birthday, when she had asked Ali if the gifts had come from her or the dogs.

“Well what makes you ask Mick?” the brunette stalled as she tried to think how to handle the situation.

“Justin told me” she looked down sadly. “Then he got grounded” she kicked at the driveway where she had stopped Ali on her way inside after work. It was two days after she had received the latest, and last, present from the dogs.

“Oh, well, sure I’m the one who goes and buys the gifts for you sweetheart. And I put them in the giftbag and hang them on the fence for you” she put her hand on the little girl’s shoulder. “But I know the dogs would give you a present if they could. You’re their favorite person in the whole world.”

“I am?” she looked up, adorably.

“You absolutely are” Ali nodded. “They love to play with you and every time they go out into the backyard do you know what the very first thing they do is?”

“What?” she stood on her tip toes as she got excited.

“They look through the fence over to your yard to see if you’re outside” Ali pointed to the place in front of the truck and the minivan where the dogs could indeed see into the Donaldson’s yard.

“And they bark at me” she smiled.

“That’s right. They bark to tell you they’re outside and they’re ready to play whenever you can come over.”

The girl grinned and looked towards the empty backyard.

“What do you say we let them out and play with them right now? Do you have time before your dinner?” the brunette perked up.

“Yup” Micky nodded and moved towards the gate by the kitchen. She turned around and waited for Ali to come and open it for her even though she had done it herself dozens of times. As long as her parents knew where she was, Micky was welcome to open the gate and come in and play with the dogs anytime they were outside. “But Justin was right?” she asked, still looking sad at the thought.

“Yes, he was” Ali admitted as she opened the gate to the backyard and stood in front of the little girl. “I’m sorry to disappoint you Micky.”

“Why...why did he tell me though?” she frowned and waited for the brunette to answer.

“I’m not sure honey. Maybe he was just being a jerky big brother” she shrugged her shoulders. “Or maybe he knows that you’re smart enough and old enough to know that the dogs can’t really go buy you a present.”

“That’s what my mom said” Micky nodded with a small smile on her face. She and Ali smiled at each other for another few seconds. “Can you let them outside now?”

“You bet” the brunette grinned.

And that had been that. No more birthday presents from the dogs for little neighbor girls. As silly as
it seemed, that small ritual had given both Micky and Ali a lot of pleasure for those seven years and the brunette was going to miss doing it.

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Deb and Mike Christopher had gone back to Miami at the end of September. They were pleased with their new condo purchase and had enjoyed August and September in it, getting it set up and turning it into their home. Drew and Josie had even had their first sleepover at Grandma’s little house before they returned south. They were going to buy a new car and Ashlyn convinced them to let her help them get a new Suburu, all-wheel drive for the New England winters, at a crazy low price. Part of the deal Ali had made for her wife with Suburu was a family discount for new vehicle purchases. Any family member other than Ashlyn and Ali, who got to use Suburu cars for free, were allowed to take advantage of the deal. Chris and Beth had already taken advantage of it down in Satellite Beach. Deb offered to buy another minivan but the keeper shot that idea down.

“For God’s sake, we’re not having another minivan in the family” she rolled her eyes. “If you ever need to use it, you’re welcome to use ours. Remember, Mike not the kids. Keep that in mind when you’re making your selection” the keeper chuckled.

Deb settled on a tricked out Suburu Outback that they used for the month of September and then parked it in the long-term garage facility at the condo. Some of these condominium associations, especially the nicer ones situated around golf courses and other ocean-front locations, knew what they were doing. They understood that a lot of their residents were splitting the seasons and would be coming and going at different times throughout the year. There was a program you could sign up for where the ‘housekeeping’ or ‘concierge’ team, depending on which term your condo used, would clean your condo for you and have your car brought from long-term parking to your driveway so it was waiting for you when you got there. They took care of the maintenance when you were away so you didn’t have to worry about anything while you were living in your other home. The Christophers hadn’t opted for that level of service, yet. But it was nice to know it was available if they ever decided to take advantage of it.

Mike’s kids were going to be in Miami for Thanksgiving that year so he and Deb wouldn’t get back up to Gloucester and Manchester until Christmastime. Mike had already told Deb to just plan on spending the twins’ first Christmas at the big old house. He knew that’s where she wanted to be. Truthfully, he had really enjoyed his summer in New England too.

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Thanksgiving was hectic but fun that year. Ali and Ashlyn had offered to host it but Ken and Vicki generously interceded. They were already hosting Christmas Day this year and Ali was trying to be nice and take on some of the family responsibility.

“You’ve got your hands full enough Princess” Ken chuckled in early October as they watched the Breakers playoff game against Orlando on tv.

He and Vicki had come to visit for the day and now, at 6:15pm on playoff Saturday, they were all packed into the living room to watch the first half of the soccer game. It was a special night, because of the playoff game, so there were no baths after dinner. The kids didn’t really watch the game but they played with their parents and grandparents in the living room and cheered when the grown-ups cheered.

“It won’t be much more work than the christening was” Ali argued. “We’ll just have to cook. But Kyle and Nate are coming up so they’ll be around to help too.”
Ken gave his daughter a sideways glance and quirked an eyebrow.

“When has your brother ever been a help in the kitchen?” he quipped.

“He’s given me a couple of haircuts in there” Ashlyn joked and made everyone laugh.

“Exactly my point” Ken chuckled.

“We’re happy to do it girls” Vicki added with her own smile, sitting with Josie on her lap and looking at a book with her. “Maybe next year you can take one of the holidays again.”

“Will the boys be around for either Thanksgiving or Christmas this year?” Ali asked a few minutes later.

“Tanner promised me he’d be home for Christmas this year” Vicki grinned. “I’m trying not to get too attached to the idea but I’d love it if it really happened.”

“He should be back in November” Ken added. “He’ll be finishing up in Colorado at the end of the month. They’re not making the playoffs this year” he chuckled. “And even if they did they wouldn’t be doing the courtesy training spots after the regular season ends.”

“I’m still hoping the Revs pick him in the draft in January” Ashlyn enthused. “That would be so awesome.”

“What about Koty?” Ali tried to get an answer to her original question.

“I’m not sure what they’re doing for Thanksgiving” Vicki replied as she reached for the book that Josie had just thrown on the floor for the third straight time.

“Josie” Ashlyn spoke sternly to her daughter after having previously asked her not to throw the book. “Don’t throw the book again. That’s enough.”

Vicki wisely put the book on the other side of her, out of the redhead’s reach. She was hoping to avoid the inevitable tantrum that would come after Josie was punished for throwing the book again.

“But I know they’re going to Bri’s parents’ for Christmas this year” Vicki finished.

“Oooh, that’s a first, isn’t it?” Ali looked excitedly at her step-mother.

“It is” Vicki nodded and then tried to hide the nerves she felt about it.

“Are we not excited about it?” Ali tried to clarify, catching the look that had flashed across Vicki’s face.

“Well, I’m not really sure...” she began slowly.

“Bri’s parents are big drinkers” Ken spoke quietly, his eyes trained on the game. “We’re afraid they’re not going to be accepting of Koty’s choices.”

“Man, that’s tough” Ashlyn commented as she got up to go into the kitchen. “He’s stronger than any of us thought though, right? He’ll be ok.”

“I hope so” Vicki said with a tense smile.

Koty and Brianna were at Ken and Vicki’s house for Thanksgiving and Tanner made it as well. It was an overcast and cool day but it wasn’t raining or too chilly. There had been no snow yet that
year and it had been a beautiful Fall with all of the leaves changing colors. Ali and Ashlyn brought their family up to Ipswich and enjoyed the day, as they always did. The Krieger Family Classic soccer game was more serious than usual that day. Something about having Tanner there made everybody try to prove their own worth, measured against the talented young man who was surely about to become a professional in the MLS in about seven weeks. Tanner, Ken, Sydney, Nathan and Dom took on Koty, Ali, Ashlyn, Kyle and Brianna and the game was no joke. Ashlyn had participated in these games sporadically over the years, between injuries, but none of the games had ever been nearly as intense as this one was. Ken and Ashlyn were the keepers and Ali warned her wife not to do anything crazy back there. It had been six months since her c-section and her body was feeling pretty good, but her breasts were still sore and swollen and any sort of direct hit with the soccer ball or the ground would cause her immense pain.

“Protect the girls, babe” the brunette whispered in her ear as she hugged her and patted her butt before the game started.

“I’ll try” Ashlyn replied. “Luckily I’ve got a good d-back to protect me too” she winked as Ali trotted into place just in front of her.

“I know I don’t have to remind anybody of this” Ali gave the entire group a hard look, “but Syd’s pregnant and Ashlyn’s breastfeeding so, you know, don’t be a…”

“And I’m ancient” Ken interjected before his daughter could finish her sentence and teach all of the children a colorful new swear word. “So let’s keep it friendly, ok?”

Sandi Leroux, Vicki and the Scott Kriegers all watched and kept an eye on the children as the game was played. It started out very friendly with everybody giving everybody else a wide berth while the ball was passed around like they were doing a practice drill. After a few minutes of this Kyle finally spoke up.

“Look, this is pretty and everything but are we gonna play soccer or what?” he spread his arms out dramatically. “I mean, I’ve gone to ballet classes that were tougher than this.”

That got everybody’s attention and made everybody but the players laugh out loud. In the seconds right after Kyle’s callout, Syd, playing D in the back, made a crisp pass to Dom on the flank. Dom dribbled a couple of steps and then hit Tanner in the middle who turned on Koty and headed for the goal. Kyle had gone up to stop Dom and Brianna ran back down the right flank keeping Nathan behind her and out of the play. Koty was already behind the play after his brother’s nifty turn, but he hustled to try and get back into it. Ali was torn between literally acting as a human shield for her wife or running up to take on Tanner and the ball. She hesitated for only a second before sprinting forward to try and at least slow down her talented step-brother. She managed to slow him just enough for Koty to get back into it from behind and, together, they forced him to pass back to Dom. Different variations on that theme happened time after time. Every single time, the brunette raced forward to stop the attacker’s progress. Sometimes she poked the ball away. Sometimes Tanner beat her. Sometimes she bodied him up when he tried to turn her and then dropped back, separating herself from him and stopping the turn. If Tanner had been Kyle’s size it wouldn’t have been any competition. But that was the knock on Tanner – he was small for a pro soccer player. Ali handled him well but she knew he wasn’t giving it his all, pretty close, but not his all.

As Ashlyn watched her wife charge out to meet the enemy time after time she was struck, probably for the first time in their eight years together, by how fierce Ali was on the pitch. She had heard stories about it from Sydney and Kyle and Ken and Deb but she had never really seen it. She knew Ali was competitive and a good athlete – she had seen evidence of both at the New Year’s Eve games at the club in Miami and in any number of bars and backyards in the Boston area. But she
hadn’t seen this soccer player, this footballer, in her before. Even when Ali had helped out at her soccer camps the scrimmages at the end of the day between staffers and campers were always strictly fun or to make the campers feel good about themselves. That day in Ken’s backyard Ali felt comfortable enough going against Tanner that she could be herself and play her game. The keeper knew her wife had faced Tanner like this hundreds of times when she had helped him get ready for his Sophomore year of college. Maybe that’s part of why she wasn’t afraid to step to him. Something about watching Ali face Tanner that afternoon moved Ashlyn deeply. This was the part of the beautiful brunette that she had wanted Ashlyn to see. This was the part of Ali that was such a part of her core, of her very essence as a human being. Ali Krieger the footballer. The keeper finally understood.

“Ash!” Ali yelled as she made a last-second, lunging, hamstring stretching stab at the ball that left Tanner’s foot at a high velocity.

Ashlyn snapped out of her daze in time to see the ball ping off of Ali’s foot, back into Tanner’s hip and then up into Ali’s face like a high-speed pinball. The brunette groaned and grabbed her left hamstring on the way down in one of the least attractive splits anyone had ever seen. Then her head snapped back as it took the impact of the ball to her face and the warrior princess dropped onto her back with her other hand covering her face. Ashlyn raced out and scooped up the ball, can’t take the keeper out of the girl even in a family pick-up game, and then continued two more steps to her wife.

“Shit, Ali” Tanner was on his knees next to her, distraught look on his face, helping her turn her torso and get her legs back in the same direction. “How did you even get to that ball? I’m so sorry...”

“It’s ok Tan” she grabbed his arm and patted it as he helped her sit up. She winced and grabbed her hamstring again and then pulled her right hand away from her face fully expecting to see blood all over it. “Oh, thank God” she smiled, relieved. “I thought for sure I had a bloody nose.”

“Al” Ashlyn panted out and knelt on the other side of her wife. “Are you ok?”

“Better than you” she quirked her eyebrow at the keeper. “Did you have a nice nap back there?” she slapped her wife’s arm. “I was trying to save you from taking a direct hit sweetheart” she gave the ‘sweetheart’ a little extra juice as she said it and glared at the blonde. “Stretch my leg” she lifted her left leg and Ashlyn stood up to help her stretch it out as Ali lay on her back.

“Wow sis, you still have those afterburners, huh?” Kyle shook his head and put his arm around Tanner’s shoulders. The younger man looked like he was going to cry he felt so sorry for hurting Ali. “She’s done that all her life” Kyle shook his head appreciatively. “Just when you think you’ve got a clean shot, she somehow gets a toe in there at the last possible second and fucks it up.”

“Language” Dom reminded quietly as Cash, Drew, Josie and James all came running onto the field of play.

“You alright Alibaba?” Sydney asked, finally getting there from her defensive position at the other end. “I haven’t seen your hamstring stretch like that in twenty years...”

“Thanks Syd” she groaned again but couldn’t keep the smile off of her face as Drew threw himself onto her stomach. “Appreciate the aging reminder.”

“Mommy!” Drew gasped out, breathless from his run. “You ok?” he asked, cocking his head to the side and waiting for the answer.

“I’m fine buddy” she smiled and winced as Ashlyn kept applying pressure to her vertical leg, stretching the muscles. “Sometimes you get a little hurt when you play sports, right?”
“Mommy, mommy!” Josie wailed as she finally made it to her mother, tears streaming down her face.

Kyle took over the stretching for Ashlyn so the keeper could pick Josie up.

“It’s ok little one” she cooed as she held her close. “Mommy’s ok. See?” she knelt down next to Ali so their daughter could see for herself.

“I’m ok Jose, I promise” Ali smiled at her little girl. “Sometimes the ball does things you don’t expect it to, right Tanner?”

“Yes” he nodded. “Did you see it bounce off of me too?”

Josie shook her head and sucked in a shuddering breath as her tears started to slow down.

“I did” Drew announced and looked up at Tanner.

“You did huh?” Tanner grinned. “You must have really good eyes then Drew.”

Ashlyn winked at the younger man, thankful he had let the boy get away with his little fib. Nobody really saw what the ball had done. It had been hit too hard and was moving too fast. The people watching from the deck thought Tanner had kicked the ball right into Ali’s face until the pinball effect had been explained to them.

“Thanks Ky” Ali said and sat up to give Drew a hug. “Come here little one” she reached for Josie, pulled her onto her lap and gave her a big hug too. “See, everything’s ok.”

“You should get some ice on that” Dom suggested. “And get it up.”

“Unless you want it to seize up on you” Sydney added and made a face. “Nothing worse than a pulled hammy.”

After Ashlyn had put both babies to bed that night she came back into their bedroom and saw Ali hobbling to the bathroom. Dom had officially diagnosed her with a pulled hamstring. Big surprise. But he didn’t think it was anything more serious than that. She would be sore as hell for a few days and limping around for up to a week but she would live. She had a fat lip and a bruised cheekbone from the ball to the face but, thankfully, her nose and eyes and teeth were all just fine.

“Here baby, let me help you” Ashlyn put her arm around Ali’s waist and took as much of her weight as she could as they moved towards the bathroom together.

The keeper helped her wife lower herself onto the toilet so she could pee and then turned to leave and give her some privacy. Ali grabbed onto her around her waist and pulled her closer, right up to her knees. The brunette hugged her and leaned her head against her stomach while she peed.

“That was fun today” she mumbled into Ashlyn’s belly.

“Yeah, a blast, right up until you killed yourself” the keeper chuckled softly and stroked her wife’s head and back.

“Well, if you hadn’t...”

“I know” Ashlyn gave in immediately. “I know. I wasn’t paying attention and you were trying to make sure I didn’t take that shot to my chest. I know honey” she bent over and kissed the brunette’s head. “I love you.”
The blonde helped her wife up when she was done and waited for her to wash her hands before helping her back to the bed. Ashlyn took the compression wrap off of Ali’s thigh and put it on her nightstand before helping her get situated with her left leg up on extra pillows under the covers.

“What were you daydreaming about back there anyway?” Ali asked softly after her keeper had gotten into bed and snuggled up to her as best as she could. The keeper was lying on her left side with her right arm across her wife’s chest, holding them close together.

“Oh, you won’t believe me if I tell you” Ashlyn blushed and buried her face into Ali’s shoulder, kissing the bare skin there.

“What” Ali rolled her eyes and tried to see her wife’s face. “Were you picturing me naked again or something?” she chuckled and kissed the top of Ashlyn’s head.

“No, although I am now...” she moved her right hand up and cupped the brunette’s breast, giving it a gentle squeeze.

“I’m not saying this to be funny” Ali started softly, “but I have such a headache...”

“I know you do Al” Ashlyn giggled and kissed her shoulder again. “I’m just teasing you. I’m exhausted too. Nighttime is so much easier when we’re both here and able-bodied” she chuckled.

“Yeah, sorry about that.” Ali squeezed her wife’s arm that was across her chest and then slowly and softly stroked it with her thumb as they lay there quietly for another moment. “So are you going to tell me or not?”

“What?” Ashlyn was confused, and sleepy, for a few seconds.

“Yeah, it did” Ali agreed.

“I don’t know why, exactly, but watching you out there today...it’s hard to explain...it was like I finally got to see that soccer player, that baller, that you’ve always been.” The keeper paused and tried to find more words to describe what it felt like. “I could almost see you in your Penn State uniform out there, tearing it up and shutting people down. The way you stepped right up to Tanner, fearless...strong, smart, fierce...”

“You saw that today?” Ali asked, her voice small but full of wonder.

“You saw that today?” Ali asked, her voice small but full of wonder.

“I did” Ashlyn leaned her head back so she could see the side of Ali’s face as it turned towards her. “It was amazing.”

They blinked sweetly at each other and were both quiet again for a few minutes before Ali spoke again.

“I think it’s because I had trained with Tanner so much before and I knew he could handle it, he needed it, you know? I sort of slipped back into that training mode with him and I really wanted to push him hard. That’s what felt different about today I think. It was me. I upped the intensity and I probably shouldn’t have. I’ll have to remember that next time.”

“I’m glad you did it” Ashlyn smiled. “I’m glad no one was killed” she teased and made her wife chuckle. “But seriously”, the keeper got up on her elbow, leaned over and kissed Ali’s lips, “I’m so happy that I got to see that part of you, finally.” She gave the brunette another soft kiss. “I think it was awesome for the kids to see it too. Drew knows I’m an athlete, but it was cool for him to see you
out there giving Tanner everything he could handle. And you took your lumps and got back up again and they both saw that too.”

“It’s weird to think about how they see us isn’t it?” the brunette mused.

“Yeah, Mama and Mommy and that’s pretty much it” she grinned. “They have no idea how freaking cool we really are.”

“Well, one of us is cool anyway” Ali smirked and stuck her tongue out at her wife.

“I was trying to be nice and included you so you wouldn’t feel bad” Ashlyn rolled her eyes. “Serves me right. I walked right into that one.”

“I love you” Ali reached up and pulled her keeper down so she could give her a tender kiss. Just when they were pulling apart the brunette captured Ashlyn’s lips again in a slow, meaningful kiss. “Thank you for telling me that” she caressed her wife’s cheek with her fingertips and smiled softly. “I’ve always wanted you to know that part of me...I’m glad you got a glimpse of it today.”

“I want more. A lot more.” Ashlyn smiled at her beautiful brunette. “You’re the most amazing woman in the whole world and I still can’t believe you’re mine. Thank you for sharing your life with me baby.”

Chapter End Notes

Also, I can't believe the Pride couldn't beat the Red Stars without Press, Ertz or Short playing. Ouch.
Although the Morgan/Marta combo seems to be finding its rhythm and that gives me hope. I think Rachel Hill's injury was a big deal, not to make excuses. Kristen Edmonds continues to be astoundingly horrible at RB. I like her so much and I feel terrible for her, but she's just awful back there. She dribbles twice, puts her arms up like she had no idea who she could possibly pass the ball to, dribbles one more time and then gives it to the other team. It must just drive Ali insane.
Here's hoping they can beat Washington Tuesday night. Mostly for the 3 points but also, still, because fuck them for how they treated my baby. Let's go Pride!!!
As if the month of December wasn’t hectic enough between the Christmas prep, the holiday parties, the year-end shareholder meeting and dinner, the Nutcracker, Mrs. Riley’s retirement party, Ali working full-time again, Noah Cross’ birthday party, and Ashlyn’s maternity leave officially coming to an end, Dodge had started to crawl the first week of the month. Ali and Ashlyn were both excited about their baby boy’s achievement, but it added a whole other level of stress to the month that they hadn’t really anticipated. If he had followed Drew’s milestone pace he would have started to crawl at the beginning of January. Dodge seemed to still be making up for lost time. It was as if the month where he didn’t thrive as well as his twin sister had spurred him on to overachieve all through his infancy. Everyone commented on how strong the boy was and he continued to eat well and grow. They wondered if Lily ate as well as he did would she be as strong?

Both twins were able to roll over, sit up and reach and grab for things all on their own by now. They were 7 months old on December 13th and ready to start eating finger foods already. Dodge, in addition to crawling, was also standing up on his own. He couldn’t walk, obviously, but his legs themselves were strong and stable enough to support him for short periods of time. Both babies were sleeping through the night about every other night and were now sleeping in their own cribs, both in the nursery. Josie transitioning to her big girl princess bed in November had been good timing. They just moved her crib back into the nursery and that was that. The coolest development with the twins was that they were starting to acknowledge each other and even entertain each other. It was the most adorable thing Ali had ever seen. They were sleeping less during the day, just three shorter naps during the day instead of six or seven, and spent more time awake - playing and learning. Ali had walked into the living room where the twins had been set up on the floor with some baby toys and a big, soft blanket. They were chatting with each other, not real words yet but all sorts of sounds came out of their mouths at different speeds and volumes, and then they both just began giggling. It went on for about ten minutes and Ali was able to grab her phone and record some of it to show Ashlyn.

And now that Dodge was crawling he was never still unless he was really tired or asleep. He was faster than even Drew had been too. It would have been funny if it wasn’t so unnerving and scary at the same time. Ashlyn loved to tell the story of how she changed his diaper in the nursery one afternoon, put him on the floor immediately – he always tried to get off of the changing table if you did anything else before putting him on the floor, you just had to hold your breath and deal with the stinky diaper after he was done and on the ground – and by the time she had turned around after taking thirty seconds to roll up and dispose of the dirty diaper, he was all the way to the gate at the top of the backstairs! It was just the beginning of an entire childhood filled with similar, and sometimes scarier, scenarios. ‘Where’s Dodge?’ would easily win the prize for most common sentence spoken in the big old house for the next ten years. Dodge Krieger was going to be a handful, that was for sure.

Ashlyn spent more time reestablishing herself at all of her business interests after taking six months
off for maternity leave. She was on-hand for the holiday season video message that the Mental Health Initiative released, urging anyone who had trouble this time of year to reach out and ask for help. She had filmed a Nike Holiday ad back in November, spending a few days with Kyle and Nathan in NYC again, and that had aired the day after Thanksgiving and started trending almost immediately. Suburu asked her to star in their upcoming national TV ad campaign for the minivan. They would be shooting the spots in Boston in January. Ashlyn was uncomfortable about it at first because she really didn’t like minivans, not even Suburu’s, and she felt fake or phony trying to talk people into buying one. But Suburu knew how she felt and had designed a commercial that was perfect for the keeper. The ad would open with a shot of Ashlyn just after helping Drew and Josie out of the minivan. All you saw were the kids running away from the minivan and laughing, Ali, vigilante as always, had been nervous about having their children in the commercial. But Ashlyn posted so many pictures and videos of them on social media already that the ad felt false if they used child actors. The compromise was to let Drew and Josie be in the commercial but not show their faces very much. After they scampered adorably away from the minivan, Ashlyn turned to the camera and talked to the audience directly, in her own, honest and casual demeanor.

‘Listen, I never wanted to drive a minivan. It’s not on my list of cool rides, you know? But when it came time to buy one for my growing family it was an easy choice...’

It was so simple and basic but it really resonated with audiences and it resulted in Ashlyn’s face appearing on televisions all across the country. She came across as her personable, charming self and that was exactly what Suburu wanted. Ashlyn checked off so many boxes for them in terms of their marketing demographics that it had been a no-brainer for the company. They flooded the market with those ads, and different versions of them, for the next three years.

Ashlyn continued working with Whitney and Cat Whitehill to put together the Academy girls’ soccer camp too. It became pretty clear that it wasn’t going to be fully operational until the summer of 2025. But that was ok. They would rather wait a year than start up something that didn’t work and give them all a bad name in the process. They were getting interest from the right people, and even some of the right people with the right money to invest, but it was just going to take more time to get it right.

Knight-Harris continued to grow, although not as quickly as it had over the past few years. But that was because it was where they wanted it to be. Both Ashlyn and Ali were concerned about the company getting too big to manage well, and they always had been. They never set out to be the biggest and weren’t sure they wanted to be. They wanted to sit tight where they were for a few years and just make sure they all got really good at what they were doing before embarking on the next-level of growth. It was a smart, conservative plan and the shareholders all agreed. Whitney had adjusted nicely to her new role in the company and the legal department was getting better all the time. And the lawyer’s big brain was always helpful when a problem that didn’t require legal popped up. Ashlyn spent time that December getting back in touch with a lot of the athletes that Knight-Harris served. She had always liked to personally call and welcome every new signing if she couldn’t meet them in person and she had six months of calls to make.
Once the keeper had started working more it was time to start taking the 7-month old twins to
daycare with Josie. They eased into it during the month of December. The end of the year wasn’t
particularly busy for Ali so she was able to work from home a lot and scheduled that time for when
Ashlyn was working so they could keep the kids home more to start. After a few frustrating snafus,
Ali and Ashlyn improved their scheduling communication so they were better able to plan ahead.
Every weekend, at some point, they spent a half hour together, or an hour sometimes, mapping out
their schedules for the upcoming week. For December they basically took Ashlyn’s schedule and
worked around that because Ali could be very flexible with hers at the end of the year.

“Sometimes I just want to be a stay-at-home mom” Ashlyn sighed heavily from her seat in the nook
as they finished one of their scheduling sessions.

Ali was adjusting her calendar in her laptop and studied her wife’s face over the top of the screen for
a few seconds.

“You can do that if you want to you know” she spoke evenly, without looking up from what she
was doing. “If you want to. You know that, right babe?” she looked up now and waited for her wife
to say something.

“Yeah, I know...and I’m not saying being a stay-at-home mom isn’t the hardest job in the world” she
added when she realized her words might have been misinterpreted.

“I know” Ali nodded and closed her laptop, finished with the schedule for the upcoming week. “We
both know how hard it is” she paused for a minute. “Are you really thinking about doing that Ash?”

“I do think about it, a lot” the blonde admitted and met her wife’s gaze. “A whole lot.”

“And...?” the brunette smiled sweetly at her keeper and reached across the table to take her hand.

“And I don’t know” Ashlyn shrugged. “I hate leaving them at daycare, I always have” she started.
“But when I was playing there just wasn’t a choice. Now it feels like there’s a choice because I can
kind of do what I want.”

“Remember that daycare is good for them too” Ali reminded gently.

“I know. I get it, I really do. I just... I don’t know what to do” her words were heavy and flat and Ali
realized her wife had been thinking about this for a long time.

“Whatsoever you decide to do I’ll support babe, you know that too, right?”

“I do” Ashlyn smiled warmly back at the brunette and squeezed her hand. “Thank you.”

“I just want to say one thing, ok?” she waited until Ashlyn nodded at her to continue. “The work
you’re doing isn’t like a 9-5, commute for 2 hours both ways type of thing. You’re right. You can do
what you want because you’ve worked your ass off your entire life and made a name for yourself
that means something and matters to people. You can do what you want Ash. And if that’s staying
here and taking care of our kids then I’m all for it. But I can’t pretend that I didn’t see your whole
body light up when you started working on the MHI. And I can’t pretend that the same thing doesn’t
happen every time you talk about the Academy. I just want you to think really carefully about what
giving up doing that other work would really mean to you. That’s all.”

They were quiet for a few minutes and Ali could tell her keeper was thinking hard about what she
had said.
“Was it this hard for you to leave Drew and Josie?” she asked in a soft voice, her watery eyes meeting Ali’s again.

“Aw, honey” Ali got up and moved to the other side of the nook to sit next to her wife. She kissed her cheek and hugged her as they sat on the bench seat of the nook that Saturday night. “Yes, it was so hard to leave both of them. Probably the hardest thing I ever had to do. And it’s especially hard when you’re still breastfeeding. You have that connection with Lily and it physically feels wrong not to have her attached to you like she has been for so long. And even though I didn’t breastfeed Josie I still carried her for nine months and took care of her every need for six months after she was born. It’s different when you’re the one who carried them. It’s a little harder, at least I think it is anyway. But our bodies make it that way on purpose. Biology tries to give the baby a chance even if they get stuck with the most horrible mother in the world, you know? Plus, your hormones are still messing with you and...it’s just really really hard. It’s not just you sweetheart.”

“Really?”

“I promise you” she leaned over and kissed her cheek again, leaving her warm lips there for an extra few seconds and then kissing her again. “But I also promise you that it gets easier. Soon you’ll be able to focus on how great it feels when you go and pick them up and they look at you like you’re the best thing in the whole wide world. The sadness of drop-off will pale in comparison to the happiness of pick-up. I promise you my love.”

Finding babysitters for four children would end up always being a challenge for Ali and Ashlyn. It was a little easier when the twins were less active. A couple who knew, roughly, the routine and who wasn’t afraid could handle all four kids for an evening or an afternoon without too much trouble. Or, if one half of the couple knew the routine he or she could direct the other half on what to do and they would be just fine. Once Dodge started crawling in early December though, all bets were off. That meant there were three mobile children under the age of 5 who had to be fairly constantly monitored and it was a much more difficult job. The only way it worked was if you gated off the living room and kept everybody in there together and hoped for the best. You had to pay attention though. If Drew or Josie had to go potty you had to help them through the gate lickity split or you’d have another kind of accident on your hands. The babysitting solution they found that December was to split up the kids. Drew and Josie would go on a sleepover to Grandpa and ViVi’s house and Whitney and Ryan would come to the big old house and watch the twins. Ali and Ashlyn didn’t ask for that kind of help too often but they did it that December.

It was at the beginning of the month so they could go on their fancy dinner and Nutcracker date together in Boston. It felt wonderful to get dressed up and go out, just the two of them. Aside from taking each other out for their birthdays, Ashlyn’s had been while they were in Los Angeles for the NWSL Championship Week, the couple really hadn’t gone out on any date nights yet. They tried to go out one night during their vacation up at the lake in August but they felt so guilty having their friends watch all four of their kids that they didn’t even enjoy themselves and returned to the big rental house after only two hours. They had managed to have a few lunch dates in Ali’s office at Knight-Harris or a nearby restaurant in Cambridge once Ashlyn started getting out of the house more and bringing the twins to daycare. When they came home that night, floating on the fairy-dusted air from the Nutcracker, they hugged Whitney and Ryan goodbye, thanked them profusely for the wonderful gift of their night out, and then climbed the backstairs to check on their sleeping angels. They stood, arm-in-arm, and looked back and forth between the two cribs. Each baby was lying on their side facing the other crib. The two moms could only imagine the conversation they must have been having before falling asleep. They quietly closed the door behind them and embraced in the hallway, holding each other close and enjoying the tail end of their magical date night.
“I love our life, so much” Ali whispered from inside the hug. “Thank you for all of it Ashlyn.”

“I was just thinking the same thing” the keeper smiled and kissed her wife’s cheek, squeezing her even tighter. “Ow” she complained and loosened her grip with a soft chuckle.

“Time to pump?” Ali asked as she leaned back, arms still around her keeper’s waist.

“I really don’t want to...” Ashlyn whined. “Look how gorgeous you are” she raked her eyes up and down Ali’s beautiful body, looking hot as hell in a tight-fitting, red dress. “I just want to hold you all night. I don’t want to waste time pumping” she leaned in and gave Ali a long, slow kiss that stirred up feelings between both their legs.

“Well I’m not going anywhere babe” Ali kissed her softly. “So go pump and then come pick up right where we left off.”

“Come with me” the keeper pouted, pursing her lips like a bratty five-year old and twisting Ali’s hips back and forth in her hands.

Ali laughed out loud, too loud for where they were standing right outside the nursery door. She ducked her head and covered her mouth as Ashlyn shushed her with a giggle. The blonde moved Ali’s hand away and pressed their lips together in another soft, romantic kiss. She pulled the brunette’s hips into her own and held her close as their lips and tongues moved together.

“Come with me” she breathed out when they finally came up for air.

“Ok” Ali gave in and let Ashlyn lead her down the front stairs.

They sat together in the nook, breast pump on the table in front of them, while the keeper spent forty minutes pumping. The house was decorated for Christmas and the family room, as always, was the most festive room in the whole house. It was warm and inviting and filled with the scent of the Christmas tree right next to the nook, in front of the side door to the backyard. Ali sat sideways on the bench seat with her legs across her wife’s lap, and her lips never more than an inch away from her keeper’s. They kissed and licked and nibbled each other the whole time, talking softly and sweetly every few minutes. It wasn’t desperate, passionate making out. It was tender, loving making out. The kind when you just want to taste your lover’s lips for the rest of your life with no need to ramp anything up to the next level. The kind of rainy day, curled on the couch together kissing that reminds you of how it was when you were first getting together and learning each other’s mouth and teeth and tongue. Ali loved kissing like that, and she always had. She always said that kissing calmed her nerves and made her feel better, no matter what was wrong. Ashlyn was a great kisser but she had always seen it as more of a means to an end than an end itself. Needless to say, after being with Ali for eight years, the best kisser by far she had ever kissed, the keeper had come to appreciate the beautiful art of the kiss.

It was Ali who was the first to disturb the calm surface of their intimate moment. She had been fighting the urge to deepen the kisses for the past ten minutes, forcing her eyes to stay shut and trying not to let her own lust ruin the sweet, tender time they were sharing. The brunette had confessed her shameful desires to Ashlyn months ago and they had talked about it several times since then. The keeper had remembered Ali talking about getting turned on by her breastfeeding back in the truck after her 6-week appointment. Ashlyn waited a few more weeks and then, after they had started having sex again, she asked the brunette about it. Truthfully, the blonde was flattered and loved that her wife got excited by her breasts. But Ali was mortified and confused and felt like it was wrong. She had been reading as much about it as she could find the time to and started to feel a little bit better about it by about month three. Apparently it was a totally normal reaction that many husbands and partners had when they saw or watched their wives breastfeed their children. The brunette was
relieved and felt less like a freak, which made her more able to talk to Ashlyn about it. It was at the beginning of September when they had a real heart to heart about it, in the safety of their bed one night between rounds of sex.

“Al, I’ve told you a million times, there’s nothing wrong with it and I love that you get turned on when I breastfeed. I wish you’d just get over it and quit acting so weird about it” Ashlyn’s words were harsher than her voice and her face as she delivered them. She stroked Ali’s cheek as they lay facing each other on their sides. “It’s not like you’re one of those weirdos who wants to be breastfed before they leave for work in the morning” she giggled and kissed her wife’s lips as Ali closed her eyes and grimaced at the thought.

“Oh God” she groaned and frowned.

“You’re. Not. Like. That” Ashlyn said each word after a sweet kiss to her lips, her forehead, her nose and her chin.

“That makes total sense baby. I get it and it’s hot, just like me” she teased.

That was the conclusion that Ali had come to after much internal debate and self-reflection. It was less about the actual milk and breastfeeding and more about Ashlyn appearing and functioning as a mother-goddess archetype to her. As if Ali needed one more thing to make her attracted to her hot wife. It could be explained almost like a woman being attracted to their husbands for getting a promotion at work and bringing home more income. It was very elemental and primal and it touched on the provider role in a relationship. It did make sense to Ali, once she allowed herself to really try and adjust to the new information she had found.

They had been having sex that September night and Ashlyn had been straddling Ali’s hips and grinding down on her while she played with her perfect breasts below her. Ali had just come and the keeper had crawled up her body and gotten into that position while Ali was still recovering. The brunette had reached out to stroke her wife’s sides and stomach and had accidentally groped one of her breasts when one last twitch jolted through her body from her orgasm. Ashlyn’s breasts, just like Ali’s had been, were sore and usually not involved in their lovemaking those days. When the brunette’s hand made contact with one, Ashlyn seductively asked if she was going to play with her breasts, and if she wanted a taste. She was just talking and not really thinking about any ramifications of the words. She missed having her breasts played with during sex, especially by Ali’s hot, talented mouth, but it just wasn’t worth the risk usually. There were four or five painful spots and touches that they would have to get through before they found the one spot on her breast that didn’t hurt. Every time they tried it they regretted it. As soon as Ali had processed the words her wife had said, ‘do you want a taste, baby?’ she freaked out and got really self-conscious and uncomfortable and basically kicked Ashlyn off of her before running to the bathroom and closing the door.
After that September incident and ensuing conversation they had both gradually gotten more comfortable with the situation. More accurately, Ali had finally decided she wasn’t a freak and was more accepting of her baser impulses when it came to Ashlyn breastfeeding. When they had sex Ali always spent time loving up her wife’s huge, beautiful breasts as much as she possibly could. Usually it wasn’t much more than some gentle kisses and caresses at the very tops of them but even that got the brunette’s juices flowing fast. On the rare occasion that they had sex and Ashlyn didn’t wear one of her nursing bras, her breasts almost always leaked when she had her orgasms. Ali, just as Ashlyn had done for her, would lick up the milk without batting an eye. By December they were able to joke and tease about it just as they would anything else in their relationship. For example, Ashlyn knew very well that asking Ali to come downstairs with her while she pumped that night was going to make it very difficult for the brunette to control herself. And that was exactly what the keeper wanted. They had a house with only babies in it that night and she wanted to take advantage of it. Nobody was going to be interrupting them or walking in on them or any of that. Likewise, by Ali finally accepting the invitation that night in the hall, she knew things were going to ramp up pretty quickly unless she could really fight to control herself. And she had done just that for thirty minutes while Ashlyn pumped.

It wasn’t really a fair fight and Ashlyn knew it. Poor Ali never stood a chance. The incredible juxtaposition of the keeper, all decked out in her gorgeous suit, with the crisp white dress shirt unbuttoned from top to bottom and open wide, and the beautiful breasts that peeked out from her nursing bra as Ali helped her get everything hooked up and connected so she could pump was just too much. Ali had felt her core twitching as soon as she brought the pump and all its accessories over to the table and saw Ashlyn finish unbuttoning the last button and spreading her shirt out wide by her hips. It had taken every ounce of control she had to rein her desire in and keep it on a low simmer as they sat together and enjoyed the sweet, tender kisses. Keeping her eyes closed was her best defense and she used it well, managing to last thirty whole minutes before her libido woke up from the lull it had been in.

Ali’s mouth became hungrier and her kisses were more urgent. The sweet nibbles became stronger nips and the brunette’s tongue became more aggressive inside Ashlyn’s welcoming mouth.

“Mmmmm baby” Ashlyn purred as Ali’s mouth moved down her neck, her hand pushing the collar of her shirt out of the way as she sucked on the keeper’s pulse point. “I can’t believe you lasted this long” she chuckled, low and throaty. “Very impressive” she sucked in a breath when she felt the sting at her pulse point. “Yessss...”

“Oh, was this a test?” Ali smirked as she opened her eyes and pulled back a little. “What did I win?” she purred as she grazed Ashlyn’s bare stomach with her fingertips, making the blonde shiver.

“Besides my undying respect?” the keeper moaned at another touch on her stomach, this one moving a little lower. “How about I take you upstairs and fuck you, nice and slow?” she squeezed what she could reach of Ali’s ass and licked her own lips invitingly.

The brunette felt her panties get even wetter than they already were as she bit her bottom lip and stared wantonly at her wife’s beautiful face.

“Are you finished down here?” Ali managed to ask, the words sticking in her throat as her desire rose even higher.

Ashlyn had shut off the pump and was getting the caps screwed onto the bottle bags, trying to concentrate and get it done quickly. She could feel the lust practically vibrating off of the brunette in her lap.

“All set...” she started to answer.
“Why don’t I just put these in the fridge” Ali offered quickly and spun her butt on the bench seat so she could stand up and move.

By the time she had hurried back, Ashlyn had separated her nipples from the breast cups and had disconnected the tubes and connectors from the pump so she could take them to the sink and wash them. The keeper looked up when she saw her wife stop short, three feet from the nook table, her eyes dark as night. Ashlyn felt her body come to life when she saw the hungry look on Ali’s face. The keeper’s breasts were still exposed, sticking out through the openings in the nursing bra she was wearing. Her nipples were still elongated from the suction of the pump and there was a coating of breastmilk on them, with one thin drizzle dripping underneath her left breast. Ashlyn sat there, mesmerized, as she watched her sexy wife reach up behind her head to undo the back of her dress and get the zipper started. They were both staring lustfully at the other and time seemed to stand still for a few minutes. Ali reached up behind her back to finish pulling the zipper down on her dress and then let the soft fabric fall forward, down her arms. She wiggled the dress down past her hips, carefully stepping out of it and tossing it over the back of the nook chair in front of her.

“Goddamn you’re gorgeous” Ashlyn breathed out and swallowed hard as she admired her wife standing in front of her in a red lace bra with matching panties and nothing else.

Ali took a step closer, loving the way her keeper seemed to be paralyzed. She stopped again, now at the edge of the table only a foot away from the object of her desire. She lowered her bra straps, one at a time, and then reached behind her back and unhooked the pretty lace bra. It dangled by the straps in the crooks of her elbows, revealing her small, beautiful breasts with their dark nipples. The brunette watched as her wife shifted in her seat and licked her lips again. Ali smirked as she slowly bent over, pulling her panties down and letting her bra land at her feet as she stepped out of them. She didn’t really have a plan, other than to get naked and tease her wife a little bit, so she was surprised when she heard the table moving. The brunette stood up and saw that Ashlyn had pushed the table two feet out, away from her spot on the bench seat. The keeper was unbuttoning her pants as her eyes bore holes into her beautiful, naked brunette. Ali closed the distance between them as Ashlyn lifted her hips and pushed her pants and boxer briefs down to her knees. Ali got on her knees and pulled the clothing down her wife’s legs as they locked eyes. The brunette pushed her wife’s knees apart and licked her lips in anticipation when she saw Ashlyn’s wet pussy, ready and waiting for her.

“Fuck babe” she moaned out as she leaned towards the blonde’s entrance.

“Why don’t you bring that mouth of yours up here first” Ashlyn suggested and nodded down at her own breasts. Her words dripped with desire.

Ali paused and looked curiously at her wife, wondering if she was just teasing her. The brunette was very aware of the breasts, and the nipples and the breastmilk going on up there and was doing everything she could to resist them. Ashlyn noticed her hesitation and smiled devilishly back at her.

“They’re ok right now” she pulled Ali up by her elbows. “Besides, you’ve earned it.”

The keeper moved her legs back closer together and guided Ali into a sitting position, straddling her thighs. As soon as Ali’s wet core touched Ashlyn’s hot thigh there was a jolt of electricity that shot between them. The brunette felt her mouth start to water as she gazed longingly at her wife’s nipples.

“Really?” she husked out, barely able to speak but wanting to make sure.

“Oh yeah, really” Ashlyn’s hands were busy, fingertips buried into Ali’s sweet ass cheeks. The brunette was so wet that it was easy for the keeper to guide her forward and back along her thigh.

“Please Al...I need to feel your mouth on me.”
Ali didn’t ask again and she didn’t wait for the answer to change. She moved both hands, carefully, around the outside of Ashlyn’s large breasts, still in the nursing bra. She used feathery touches along the tops of her breasts and smirked when she saw the goosebumps appear there. She softly moved her palms over Ashlyn’s exposed nipples and felt a thrill when the keeper sucked in another breath.

“Yes, baby...” Ashlyn moaned.

The brunette leaned down and gently took Ashlyn’s left nipple into her mouth, barely sucking on it and just lightly licking the exposed breast around the nipple with her hot tongue. She could taste the tiny bit of breastmilk and moved her tongue down, as far as she could with the nursing bra in the way, to lick up the thin trail of milk there. She moaned when she felt Ashlyn arch her back and shove her breast farther into her mouth. The keeper had her hands on Ali’s hips now and was sliding her slowly back and forth along her strong thigh, loving the way her juices and short hairs provided lubrication and friction in just the right amounts.

“Mmmmmmm” Ali moaned and closed her eyes as she gently licked and sucked on the nipple in her mouth. She swirled her tongue around and made sure to get the hard-working breast and nipple as clean as possible before letting it go. “Fuck” she groaned, turned on beyond belief.

“Don’t forget this one now” Ashlyn teased in a playful, sexy voice.

Ali moved her mouth to Ashlyn’s right breast and repeated all of the delicious movements again, fighting hard with herself not to be too rough or suck too hard or nibble even just a little bit. By the time she was finished with that breast she really thought she was going to come, between those nipples and the way Ashlyn was working her up against her thigh.

“Jesus Christ” she mumbled against Ashlyn’s lips after giving her a searing kiss. “I’m gonna come...”

Ashlyn was surprised at the speed at which they had arrived at this moment, but when she opened her eyes she could see her wife was definitely about to have an orgasm. Her neck and face were flushed, her chest was starting to heave and her breathing was becoming more labored. Her eyes were dark and lidded and her legs were both starting to tremble slightly.

“Let me help you with that, sexy” she purred into Ali’s ear as the brunette leaned her head forward and rested it heavily against the top of Ashlyn’s shoulder.

The blonde spread her legs out just a bit wider and slid Ali’s hot core back just a little bit so she had room to put her hand between their two bodies. Ali’s wet thighs slid easily as Ashlyn’s legs moved out, creating a gap for her right hand to fit into. Ashlyn put her whole palm up against her wife’s pulsing core and held it there for a couple of seconds. She could feel Ali grinding against it and breathing short, hot breaths into her shoulder.

“Oh fuck, yes babe...fuck me...please fuck me...”

Ashlyn made sure her two middle fingers were nice and wet and then pushed them up and into Ali’s throbbing center.

“Yessss” she hissed out and clung to the back of her keeper’s shoulders with both hands, forehead still laying on one of them.

The blonde didn’t waste any time. Ali was going to come and she was only too happy to help her get there.

“Holy shit, you’re fucking soaked” she gasped out when she felt how wet the brunette was. “Jesus that’s hot. Fucking hell...” she groaned out and turned her head to try and kiss Ali. All she could
reach was the side of her head but she kissed it anyway, humming into it and nuzzling it with her nose. “Damn baby” she grunted into Ali’s head as she began to thrust her fingers into the brunette’s drenched pussy.

“Unnnnnhhhh...yes, oh God...unnnnhhh” Ali moaned as she sat up straighter and started to ride her wife’s long, strong fingers.

Ashlyn leaned forward and sucked one of the most perfect breasts in the world into her mouth, working her tongue all around it and flicking the stiffening nipple a few times while she sucked hard.

“Fuck!” Ali arched her back as she yelled. She tilted her head back and let her mouth hang open as her whole body bounced with her wife’s fast, hard pumping. Every thrust of Ashlyn’s hand brought the heel of her palm up against the brunette’s clit and sent shivers of pleasure up her spine. “Oh my fucking God...” she exhaled and brought her hand to the breast not in Ashlyn’s mouth.

As soon as the keeper felt Ali’s legs start to shake and her silky walls start to clamp down around her fingers, Ashlyn moved her other hand to her wife’s clit and started to rub it. The touch was like a shock and Ali’s body responded accordingly. She sat bolt upright, straightening her head up and opening her eyes wide. Ashlyn tried to move her mouth back onto the brunnette’s breast but by then Ali’s orgasm had taken over. Her whole body shook and her legs tensed as she continued trying to ride Ashlyn’s fingers as she came hard.

“Oh...fuck...yesxxxxxxxxxxxx!!!” she shouted out as she twitched and shook and then doubled over, collapsing onto her wife’s strong shoulders again.

It took them both a few minutes to catch their breath as they stayed in that position. Ashlyn pulled her fingers out and brought her legs back together so her lap was more comfortable for Ali to sit on. She pulled the brunette closer, by her hips, so they were flush against each other and then wrapped her arms around her waist. She pressed kisses into Ali’s shoulder and loved the way her wife’s hand had grabbed a fistful of the back of the dress shirt that she still wore. Ashlyn held her wife, her soulmate, the woman of her dreams, in her arms and couldn’t imagine loving another person half as much as she loved her beautiful brunette. Their evening had ranged over so many different emotions and feelings and parts of their relationship. There had been tender, romantic moments as they held hands and whispered to each other at the ballet. There had been loud, boisterous laughter as they told each other stories during dinner. There had been soft, loving moments as they checked on their babies in their cribs. There had been sweet, gentle moments as they kissed in the nook. All of those were wonderful and so important to both of them and to the health and success of their relationship and marriage and family life. But the steamy, passionate, impossibly intimate moments they had just shared were what made everything else possible. Their engine ran on sex and the connection it created and strengthened between them. It had always been that way with them and they didn’t see how it could ever be any other way for them. They needed that visceral bond, that deep attachment between their physical bodies to keep things going. They weren’t nymphomaniacs and they knew other couples were different. Sometimes a couple needed all of the other stuff to make the sex possible, it was all good, just in a different order. For Ali and Ashlyn, once they became a couple that physical link was the center of their universe and they knew it.

“Oh my God babe” Ali finally breathed out as she lifted her head and looked at her gorgeous wife. “That was incredible. Thank you” she brought their lips together in a soft, slow kiss. “And thank you for loving me...no matter what my kinks are” she smiled bashfully and kissed the blonde again.

“I love you so much baby. Always. No matter what.”
Let me know what you think of Ali's borderline kink. I did a ton of research. There are, roughly, three different 'categories' of this breastfeeding as turn-on thing.
The first, and most common, is the person who thinks it's sexy when their wife breastfeeds simply because her breasts are part of their sexual intimacy practices, and also because they're bigger when breastfeeding. This person finds the breasts themselves sexy and gets turned on by seeing the breasts, not the baby at the nipple or the actual act of breastfeeding. Ashlyn, and I think, honestly, most of the world falls into this category. (Unless you're one of the few who is completely disgusted by breastfeeding in general. Poor you.)
The second is the person who thinks it's sexy when their wife breastfeeds because of the act of breastfeeding itself, actually seeing the baby suckling at the breast. This is where, as I wrote in the chapter, the person taps into a more psychological response that then becomes sexual. This is where Ali is. It's less common than the first 'category' but certainly not uncommon, at all. Ali probably falls into category 1 as well - but I can't see how you wouldn't be in that category, really. I mean, if you like boobs at all.
The third are those who get off on breastfeeding themselves, from their wife's breasts, as if they were the baby. This falls more into a fetishistic category than the previous two, obviously. And this is different from people who suck some breastmilk from their wives' breasts as a byproduct of their normal sexual experience during lovemaking. Most people like to suck on boobs during sex. If you do that and your wife is breastfeeding you're probably going to get some breastmilk in your mouth. That's not what I'm talking about. The fetish is when you act like the baby and feed (like, for twenty or thirty minutes) at your wife's breast or breasts. Some of the stories I read the guys full-on feed for a half an hour at each breast. And I want to say, although my research was in no way scientific - I just read a lot online and in some books, I didn't read about any women having this fetish. It was all men. However, I'm sure there are some gals out there who must fall into that category and just haven't been researched yet. Right? And I did not spend much time on the third category, but suffice to say there are many levels and degrees of 'dedication' to 'acting like a baby' in that world. You've been warned. :)
Anyway, sorry for the long explanation. I wanted to make my snowflake interesting and real but not a freak. lol. Hopefully that's how it came across. But let me know, if you don't mind.
Thanks! <3
My 'Mary Sarah'

Chapter Notes

This is it for this part of the story my friends. It's the longest installment I've ever done. But it covered three years and saw the birth of three babies! Thanks for hanging in there with me as our favorite couple went from being new moms of one child to hard-working parents of four kids under the age of 5!! Yowza!

I'll keep posting shorter installments as I write them. I'm still tinkering with the format but if you like these characters and this world you have my word - they'll be back. I love them too.

And remember to check out The Sea Captain's House blog on Tumblr (if you want). I finally put up all the floor plan sketches that I've been working from and some maps of the area in case anybody wants to get a better feel for that stuff. Search 'beautyinthemoonlight1124' if you're interested.

The second week of December was busier than usual for Ashlyn. She had meetings at the MHI as well as the Knight-Harris annual year-end shareholders meeting and dinner later in the week. The keeper had squeezed in a meeting with Whitney about the Academy too, trying to maximize her time in Cambridge and away from the big old house. She found that once she had managed to drop off Josie and the twins at daycare it was better if she could be super productive while she was without them. She felt better about it if she had a lot to show for the time spent. After they met in Ashlyn’s office at K-H, Ali took them both to lunch at a nearby restaurant where they finalized plans for the shareholders meeting and dinner later in the week. It was awesome the way Whitney had fit into the company so seamlessly. Ali wasn’t surprised but she was relieved and happy. Having a fully functional legal department handle all of their contract documents had saved K-H a ton of money. It was one of the best investments they had ever made. The brunette knew, from living with Whitney for so long and becoming good friends with her over the years, that she would enjoy working with the talented and intelligent lawyer. She just had no idea how much. She found herself running a lot of things by Whitney, just to get her take on them. Her opinion was often different than Ali’s and the brunette didn’t always change her mind about a particular issue, but she loved having Whitney there as a sounding board she trusted implicitly. Ali didn’t realize how much she had been missing that until she found it in Whitney. That wasn’t a knock on Ashlyn, at all. The keeper was still Ali’s first and best advisor on any matter that came up at work or in life in general. But Ashlyn’s many skills and strengths did not translate well to the business world. Sometimes Ali just needed to talk to somebody whose brain worked almost effortlessly in that environment and that’s where Whitney fit the bill.

Whitney had always liked Ali, they were more alike than different – although they were very different. She knew what she was getting with the brunette and she had always admired and respected her honesty and integrity. Ali had won the lawyer over back in 2015 when she found the strength to be just friends with Ashlyn even though she had fallen head over heels in love with her already. Whitney didn’t think the brunette could actually keep her promise to her – that she would put aside her romantic feelings and just be the friend that the keeper needed at the time. But she had done it. Taking the job at Knight-Harris had been a risk for Whitney, even though Ali had gone out of her way to make it the sweetest deal she possibly could. But the lawyer looked back over her history with the brunette and knew she could trust her. She knew that if she took the job and worked
hard it would pay off for her financially and also make her a better lawyer. Whitney had watched Ali and Ashlyn clash over the years about their roles at work versus their roles at home. It was discouraging to see them struggle with it at the beginning but they had gotten much better about it as time passed by. That was the only thing Whitney was afraid of when she took the job. She didn’t want her relationship with Ashlyn to change. So far it hadn’t, well, maybe improved and gotten deeper. It had been a total trip watching big, tough Ashlyn Harris navigate the pregnancy train. And now Whitney couldn’t believe her eyes sometimes when she saw her best friend breastfeeding and being in total mom mode. Ashlyn fucking Harris had four little kids!! It was a sight to behold and the lawyer was extremely grateful for her front row seat. It had been a busy, exciting, productive and exhilarating ten months since she started at K-H and Whitney was looking forward to the next year just as much. She had big plans.

After lunch Ashlyn and Whitney went to do some Christmas shopping, driving to the nearest Toys-R-Us so they could buy gifts for the four-family children. They also had to get Noah Cross his birthday present. He was turning eight on Friday and Niki and Molly were having his birthday party on Saturday.

“Are you sure this is the right game?” the lawyer asked as she furrowed her brow and read the back of the video game case again. “It doesn’t look like it’s for an 8-year old.”

“Yeah, it’s right here on the list...ummm...” Ashlyn pursed her lips as she scanned the piece of paper in her hands. The keeper had taken all the texts and emails she had exchanged with Ali, Niki and Sydney and written out a list that she could work from while she shopped. It was old-fashioned, she knew, but she liked to have one big list. “Here it is” she put her finger next to an item on the list and lifted her eyes, squinting at the video game Whitney held up in front of her. “Yeah, that’s definitely it” the keeper took the game and started to read the back of the case.

“So, ummm, I need to tell you something Ash...” Whitney’s voice was nervous but her face was smiling, shyly.

“What?” the keeper glanced up at her best friend and then shook her head. “You’re right, this doesn’t look right for an 8-year old” she frowned. “What the hell?” she handed the game back to the lawyer and started pushing the cart again. “We’ll have to go to plan B.”

“Ash, listen” Whitney started again, pushing her own cart behind the determined shopper. “Wait a minute, would ya?”

“We’ve really gotta keep moving Whit” Ashlyn turned around to face her friend, one hand still on the cart and a look of serious focus on her face. “It’s already 2pm and we’re not even half done yet...” she stopped talking when she finally noticed the nervous smile on the lawyer’s pretty face. “Uh oh” she swallowed hard. “What’s going on?”

The video game and electronic section at Toys-R-Us was not the place for a quiet conversation and as soon as Whitney opened her mouth they both realized they had to move. Three other shoppers with carts were already trying to get around them as they stopped there. Ashlyn scanned the surrounding area and started to push her cart with a purpose toward the clothing section at the other end of the main aisle they turned onto.

“Come on” she directed and Whitney followed behind.

Parked in the quietest corner, near the fancy toddler clothes, Ashlyn turned her worried hazel eyes to the lawyer and took a deep breath.

“It’s nothing bad Ash” Whitney smiled again. “At least I hope it’s not anyway.”
“Ok, spill it” the keeper nodded and braced herself, afraid her best friend was going to tell her she was leaving K-H.

“Dirty truth?” Whitney asked softly as she studied Ashlyn’s face.

“Always Whit. Always” she managed a half-smile, still too nervous for anything more.

“Do you remember when we were on the road and I told you I was going to retire after the next season?”

“Sure, of course” the keeper nodded again as she called the memory to the front of her mind. “I tried to talk you out of it I think. Like an ass.”

“No” Whitney giggled. “You were really sweet about it, after the shock wore off. I’ll never forget it.” She smiled at Ashlyn and was relieved to see the gesture returned, finally. “Do you remember what I said I wanted to do after I retired and why I was retiring then?”

“Law school, obviously” Ashlyn shrugged her shoulders. “You were ready to go get your degree and start changing the world like the boss that you are” she grinned.

“Well, yes, definitely. But...” the lawyer was getting frustrated and this was taking too long. “Oh, fuck it...I want to have a baby. And I’d like it to be next year, hopefully. We’ve been trying for a few weeks already...”

She had spoken quickly, pushing the words out of her mouth as fast as she could because she was excited about them as well as nervous about how her friend would receive them. Before she could finish another sentence Ashlyn stepped towards her and wrapped her in a big hug, squeezing her tightly and lifting her off the ground about an inch by leaning backwards.

“Hey” Whitney grunted out, giggling. “Doesn’t this hurt your boobs?” she giggled again as Ashlyn returned her feet to the floor but didn’t let go.

“Like a motherfucker, but you’re worth it” she whispered emotionally. “I’m so happy for you Whit. You’re going to be the best mom in the whole world.”

“You’re not mad?”

“Why would I be mad, you nutbag?” Ashlyn leaned back and gave the lawyer a quizzical look.

They ended the hug but still stood close together. The keeper kept her hand on Whitney’s shoulder and alternated patting it and rubbing her arm as they continued to talk.

“Well, I just started at Knight-Harris and I’m already planning to have a baby and need maternity leave...”

“Whitney Elizabeth Flanagan” Ashlyn said seriously and stared hard at her best friend. “You cannot be serious. If there’s one thing we do well at the office it’s have babies. Ali set it up right. You don’t have to worry about a thing. I promise.”

“Are you sure?” the nervous look was still in her eyes.

“I’m totally sure” Ashlyn grinned. “Seriously, Ali’s just been waiting for somebody else at work to have a baby so she could start working on a nursery or daycare right at the office. She doesn’t feel comfortable doing it when we’re the only ones with kids” she chuckled.
“Really?” the lawyer’s eyes were wide.

“I swear to God. Call and ask her yourself. She’s going to be so psyched, and I don’t just mean about the daycare” she laughed.

Whitney finally relaxed and laughed with her friend as the keeper rattled off the many benefits K-H offered for parents from 6-months maternity/family leave to the longer hospital stay to the flexible hours and the remote set-up so she could work from home if she needed to.

“I’ll make sure I have somebody I trust up and running to cover for me while I’m out, don’t worry about that” she offered quickly.

“I know you will” Ashlyn beamed at the lawyer. “I know you will.”

“And I won’t let anything get in the way of the Academy either” she added just as quickly. “Summer of 2025 or bust, and we don’t bust” she grinned.

“No we do not. Summer of 2025 is going to be awesome” the keeper grinned and her dimple appeared. “A new baby and the Academy...man, life is so good.”

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The second time Ali and Ashlyn got babysitters in December was so they could have some privacy and wrap the presents from Santa for the kids. It was just easier if Drew and Josie and their inquisitive eyes and ears weren’t in the house. They didn’t need to call on Whitney and Ryan that time because Sydney had come up to visit with Ali for the evening. Ashlyn drove Drew and Josie to Deb and Mike Christopher’s condo that night. It was the week before Christmas, the holiday was on a Monday this year, and they had come up from Miami to enjoy the festivities with all of the little Kriegers.

“You’re sure you don’t just want me to come over and spend the night?” Deb asked one last time over the phone that afternoon.

“No, thanks Deb” Ashlyn replied. “Syd’s coming up tonight and she and Ali will watch the babies while I get a head start on the wrapping. Once they’re in bed Al will come up and we’ll get it finished.”

“Alright” Deb chuckled. “But don’t be shy if you girls need me. I didn’t come up here for the weather” she laughed.

Christmas gifts, and birthday gifts for that matter, for the kids was something Ashlyn and Ali had different opinions about. Neither was right and neither was wrong but they had to come to an agreement and had duked it out back when Drew was about two years old. Ashlyn had grown up without much and was dead set against giving the kids too many presents. She never got very many Christmas gifts and hardly ever received what she really wanted. It had been tough and disappointing but it had taught her so many valuable lessons that had made her the kind, thoughtful, generous person she was today. Ali had always received several gifts for her birthday and for Christmas and almost always gotten the one thing on her list that she was most excited about. She and Kyle both could have grown up to be selfish, spoiled brats but they didn’t. Deb and Ken had made sure they never took anything for granted and it hadn’t been easy. Ali always told her wife that watching Sydney and Sandi Leroux struggle financially changed everything about the way she saw the world. It had taught her a new level of appreciation even greater than the one her parents had instilled in her. And those experiences, as well as sharing the wonderful gifts she did receive with her best friend, had shaped Ali into the beautiful human being she was today.
Ali didn’t want to deny her children anything and Ashlyn didn’t want to give them more than they really had to. It was a tough challenge for them to negotiate. They compromised, as usual, and their children received more than Ashlyn ever had but less than Ali always had. It had turned out to be a very good lesson for all of them in the long run. Ashlyn hated being the ‘mean one’ who nagged her wife all the time about buying the kids too many things. And the brunette had been able, finally, to express to her wife how frustrating it was for her all the time being the ‘mean one’ when it came to discipline and rules and things like that.

“That feeling you just described that you don’t like” Ali had said to the blonde back before Josie’s first Christmas. “Well that’s how I feel every time you bend a rule and make me be the unfun mom.”

It had taken almost the whole rest of the day for Ashlyn to come back and talk to her wife about it again.

“I’m really sorry Al” she had started. “That’s a terrible feeling and if you get that feeling every time I break a rule or bend a rule for Drew then you must feel that way a lot.” She swallowed hard and lifted her eyes to meet her favorite whiskey-colored ones gazing back at her. “I don’t ever want to make you feel that shitty again.”

“Honey it’s ok” Ali’s voice was soft and sensitive. “I mean, it’s not ok when you do that, but I know you have a hard time with being the bad guy. It’s not news to me.” She paused and took her wife’s hand. “I just wanted you to know that that’s how it feels for me. I know you don’t like it and I’ll try to be better about buying them too many things. I promise. You really hit the nail on the head when you talked about not knowing what to buy Drew for Christmas this year because we had, I had, already gotten him every single thing he had asked for throughout the year. That’s wrong. That’s not how my parents raised me either. I’ll find a better balance.”

“I know you will. Thank you” Ashlyn smiled softly at her sweet wife. “I just don’t know what I’d do if one of our kids turned out to be a spoiled brat” she shook her head. “I can’t think of much worse than that.”

That December evening, as Ashlyn went up to the attic on the third floor and pulled the bags full of gifts out of their hiding places, she was pleasantly surprised by the number of bags that covered the big work table in her studio fifteen minutes later. Some of the bigger toys came in big boxes that needed assembly. Those would have to wait until Christmas Eve. The keeper was starting to understand why parents were always so tired on Christmas morning. Ali had insisted on buying and using wrapping paper that was unique to Santa’s gifts. Ashlyn thought this was complete overkill and playfully accused her wife of thinking too hard about all of this.

“Hey, if Kyle and I noticed it then our kids certainly will” the brunette defended her actions with her hands on her hips and a quirk of her eyebrow. “Josie will for sure, even if Drew doesn’t.”

Ashlyn chuckled to herself that night in the studio as she pulled out the three big rolls of ‘Santa’s’ wrapping paper from one of her file drawers. She shook her head but she had to admit that Josie probably would notice if Santa’s gifts came wrapped in the same paper as theirs did. She was only 2-1/2 years old but she was smart and observant as hell. Better safe than sorry, for sure. Another Christmas tradition they had different opinions on was whether or not the goodies that Santa put in your stocking were wrapped or not. Ali thought they should be wrapped and Ashlyn thought the stocking was the wrapping. The keeper had given in on this one and they wrapped the stocking gifts for Drew’s first three Christmases, also Josie’s first. But this year, Ali decided it was just too much. They had four kids now and they would need to be smart and efficient or they wouldn’t survive Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

Once Ali had joined her upstairs, about 8:15pm after the babies were in their cribs and she had said
goodnight to Sydney, the couple managed to plow through the bulk of the gifts. They wrapped quickly but nicely, not too rushed. Ashlyn had Christmas music playing and the candles in the windows were still lit and cast a beautiful glow to the room. A lot of Ashlyn’s time before then had been spent separating the gifts into piles for each child so they could make sure things were evenly distributed. The kids were too young to notice but the moms still wanted things to be fair. Ali brought her master list and crossed things off as they went, going back and taking care of the items the keeper had already wrapped as well.

“Oh shit” Ashlyn frowned as her shoulders slumped.

“What’s the matter?”

“I didn’t buy any gift labels when I got Santa’s wrapping paper” the keeper whined and sighed dramatically. “Now what are we going to do?”

“Have you wrapped any gifts yet that aren’t from Santa?” Ali asked thoughtfully.

“No, not yet. Why?”

“Well I haven’t either. So let’s just use the gift labels we already have and then put them away with the Santa paper. Then we’ll just buy new ones to use with our presents” she shrugged and looked at the blonde for approval.

“Genius plan honey!” the keeper enthused and grinned. “Why didn’t I think of that?” she chuckled and rolled her eyes.

“Because it’s late and you’ve been up here for hours babe” Ali giggled as she moved to the other side of the work table and stood between her wife’s legs as she sat on the stool. She kissed Ashlyn’s lips sweetly and wrapped her up in a hug. “Did you pump already?”

“Yes, back at 7:30pm as usual.”

“That was dumb of us” Ali chuckled. “You should have just fed her. The presents could have waited a half hour. They’re not going anywhere” she shook her head at her wife and giggled.

“I think if I can hold-off until midnight I’ll pump again and maybe then they won’t hurt so much in the morning.”

Now that the twins were sleeping through the night, Ashlyn’s breasts weren’t being emptied at 2 or 3am anymore. That made it very uncomfortable for her in the morning because her breasts were full and sometimes very painful because of it.

“Sounds like a good plan” Ali brought their lips together in another kiss, this one more meaningful. “And it seems as though you have about an hour or so to kill before then...” she bit her bottom lip and grinned mischievously at her wife. “Whatever could we do to fill the time?” she flirted shamelessly.

“Well I don’t know about you” Ashlyn sat up a bit and tried to swivel the stool back to face the work table. She didn’t get far though because Ali was still standing between her legs. “But I’m going to get this wrapping done, once and for all...” she tried to say with a straight face.

“Oh really?” Ali quirked her eyebrow and accepted the challenge. “Well I’ve got a present right here in front of me that I’m just dying to unwrap...” she ran her fingertips down Ashlyn’s chest, through the valley of her breasts and down to the waistband of her joggers. “Wanna help me?” she purred into her keeper’s ear and then licked and kissed her way down her neck.
“Oh, geez, I don’t know Al” Ashlyn managed to speak clearly despite the feelings her wife’s tongue was stirring up in her. “These presents aren’t gonna wrap themselves...”

“Don’t you worry about that” the brunette kissed her way across Ashlyn’s throat to the other side of her neck and began sucking her way up towards her other ear. “I’ll finish these last few tomorrow morning” she spoke between kisses. “We don’t have to get the kids before 10am. My mom made me promise...” her fingers slid into Ashlyn’s pants and scratched at her short hairs beneath her boxer briefs.

“Oh, well...” Ashlyn swallowed hard as the new sensations swept over her. Ali’s mouth felt amazing on her neck and her fingers were driving her crazy, so close to where she really wanted them. “In that case, maybe...” she froze as the brunette’s teeth nipped at her earlobe, “maybe these last few presents can wait...”

“Oh my God Ash” Ali pulled back excitedly, her eyebrows raised and a big smile on her face.

“Wh...what’s happening?” Ashlyn asked, confused.

“No” Ali closed her eyes and shook her head, frustrated at herself for not thinking of this sooner. “Your furniture challenge!”

“What about it?” the keeper frowned as she tried to figure out what was happening. “We finished it...”

“I know we did” Ali giggled and gave her wife a big, sloppy kiss. “But that was before we bought the new pullout couch...right...over...there...” she punctuated each word with a kiss, removing her hand from inside Ashlyn’s pants and pulling her off of the stool.

“Holy shit!” the keeper’s face lit up. “You’re absolutely right! What the hell are we waiting for?” she giggled and took Ali by the hand, leading her to the five-month old couch.

As much as Ali complained, usually playfully, about Ashlyn’s furniture challenge or her fireplace challenge, she had missed them when they were done. She hadn’t admitted that to her keeper yet and she wasn’t sure she ever would. But at that moment she was very grateful for the new piece of furniture that had been added to their list, bringing the challenge back to life. They took their time, stripping each other bare and then enjoying what they had unwrapped. That hour turned into almost two hours as they worshipped each other’s bodies and completed the recently resurrected furniture challenge with gusto. When Ashlyn came for the third time Ali rested her head on her keeper’s thigh, more than content in her favorite spot.

“Come up here” the blonde panted out as she tugged lightly on Ali’s arm.

“I will, in a minute” she breathed in her lover’s scent deeply and closed her eyes. “I just wanna stay in my spot for a minute, ok babe?”

It was sort of a bastardized version of her spot. There wasn’t room on the couch for Ali to really get into position so she just stretched herself out lengthwise between Ashlyn’s legs, lying on her side. After what the brunette had just done to and for the keeper, Ashlyn couldn’t ask for another thing. She reached down and fondled Ali’s head, satisfied with that and holding her other hand as she recovered from her powerful orgasm.

“Ok baby” she exhaled. “Whatever you want. I love you.”

It really was only a couple of minutes before the back of the ‘Mary Sarah’ tattoo caught the brunette’s eye. Ashlyn’s right leg was bent at the knee, leaning against the back of the couch. She
could see the stern of the schooner as it wrapped around her wife’s thigh from behind.

“I want to see them again” she spoke softly and then pressed a kiss to Ashlyn’s clit and then inner thigh and then inside her right knee as she sat up. “Can I see them again?” she turned her head and smiled shyly at her beautiful wife.

“Sure, always honey” Ashlyn replied as she gently rolled over onto her stomach, careful not to put too much pressure on her aching breasts.

Ali backed down towards the end of the couch so her keeper could turn over and then moved back up to kneel between her legs again. She ran her hands across Ashlyn’s ass, incapable of passing it by without giving it some attention, and then bent over and kissed both cheeks. The brunette brought her right hand down onto the back of her wife’s right thigh, tenderly moving her fingers along the tattoo there. She moved her index finger down the mainmast of the schooner, the taller, bigger mast that supported the mainsail and sat more towards the back of the ship. Ali traced the letters that made up Drew’s full name and date of birth as her finger moved down the mainmast and then placed a soft kiss there, making her wife’s leg twitch at the warm contact.

“Our sweet boy” Ali said softly.

The brunette repeated the action on the slightly shorter and thinner foremast that sat closer to the front or bow of the schooner and supported the foresail. She pressed another kiss when she finished tracing Josie’s full name and date of birth, inked into her wife’s skin.

“Our little one.”

Ali brought her attention to the boom at the bottom of the mainsail. This was the piece of wood that weighted and supported the mainsail. The gaff was the corresponding piece at the top of the mainsail. The foresail had the same two support pieces, a boom and a gaff. The brunette ghosted her finger from left to right across the boom at the bottom of the mainsail. It had been three months since Ashlyn had gotten the two new names added to the two booms and Ali was still careful and gentle even though they no longer hurt or itched or anything. She was always tender with this tattoo. Dodge’s full name and date of birth now graced the boom of the mainsail, written just above it.

“Our baby boy” she cooed as she kissed the new tattoo.

And then, finally, she did the same thing along the boom of the foresail, tracing Lily’s full name and date of birth and then kissing it tenderly.

“Our Lily girl.”

She worked both her hands over the tattoo and Ashlyn’s entire thigh, caressing it and letting all of the emotions attached to it fill her chest and heart and mind. She felt overwhelmed by love. The love she had for her beautiful children, each one so unique and different, even the twins. The love she had for this house in which all of her dreams had come true. The love she had for the life she had worked so hard for, the bravery and courage she had shown to change jobs, start a new company, go back to school, all while starting a family and a future with the woman of her dreams. And the love she felt for her wife, her sweet, sensitive, strong Ashlyn... it dwarfed them all. She remembered sometimes the conversation she and her keeper had had before Drew was born about how afraid they both were that he would somehow change the way they felt about each other. They had both been worried that he would appropriate some of the love they shared with each other and cause them to love each other less. At the time, five years ago, their brains helped them talk each other out of that worry. They knew, logically, that it wouldn’t happen. They would love their baby to the ends of the earth but they would still, somehow, love each other just the same. And they had been relieved when that had
proven true. Their hearts had just grown bigger to accommodate all the extra love for their son. Eight years and four babies later it was still true. In fact, Ali was almost certain, her love for her wife had multiplied each time a new baby joined the family. All of the things she had loved about the keeper when they were single and carefree had only been amplified by the passage of time and the growth of their family. And there were so many new things that the brunette had fallen in love with about Ashlyn as a mom, as a caregiver, as a family provider, as a true partner in life. It was impossible to measure the depth of her love for her sweet keeper because it kept getting deeper every single day. Ali knew now, without even needing any logical or rational proof, that her love would continue to grow and deepen for the rest of their lives together, and beyond. It was an indescribable feeling that filled every part of her body and mind. It was exhilarating and soothing at the same time and the brunette needed to hold her wife right that second.

Ali placed one last lingering kiss to the schooner and then crawled up to spoon her wife from behind, helping Ashlyn roll onto her side. She wrapped her arm around her stomach and pulled her close, loving the way her soft, warm skin felt against her naked body. She moved her right hand lower and traced the spider-web like stretchmarks that adorned her belly, pressing a kiss to her neck and then nuzzling her nose there. Ali brought her hand back up and clasped Ashlyn’s, up high by her heart. She was so grateful to have this woman in her life, in her arms, in her soul. There just weren’t words to express how happy and appreciative she was that the keeper was hers. After a long few minutes of breathing and squeezing, the brunette’s thoughts shifted back to the one thing that she was most grateful for at that time of their lives. One facet of their world that stuck out a little bit more than the rest and probably would for a very long time. She knew their lives would grow and change and evolve as their children grew up and started lives of their own. She looked forward to that, even though thinking about it made her unbelievably sad sometimes. But now, right now in their lives she was most grateful for one thing and her voice shook with emotion as she finally spoke.

“Thank you for always taking such good care of our babies sweetheart” she kissed Ashlyn’s shoulder and reached her hand down to touch the back of her right thigh again. “Lightweight and strong...my own ‘Mary Sarah’...I love you.”

Ashlyn’s voice was just as thick with emotion, obviously sensing the weight of the moment and feeling the love expanding through the space around them.

“And thank you for always leading us home, my love.”

Chapter End Notes

If anybody wants to keep talking soccer with me I would love it!!! Let me know in the comments and we'll figure out how to do that (probably email but whatever you think works best).

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!